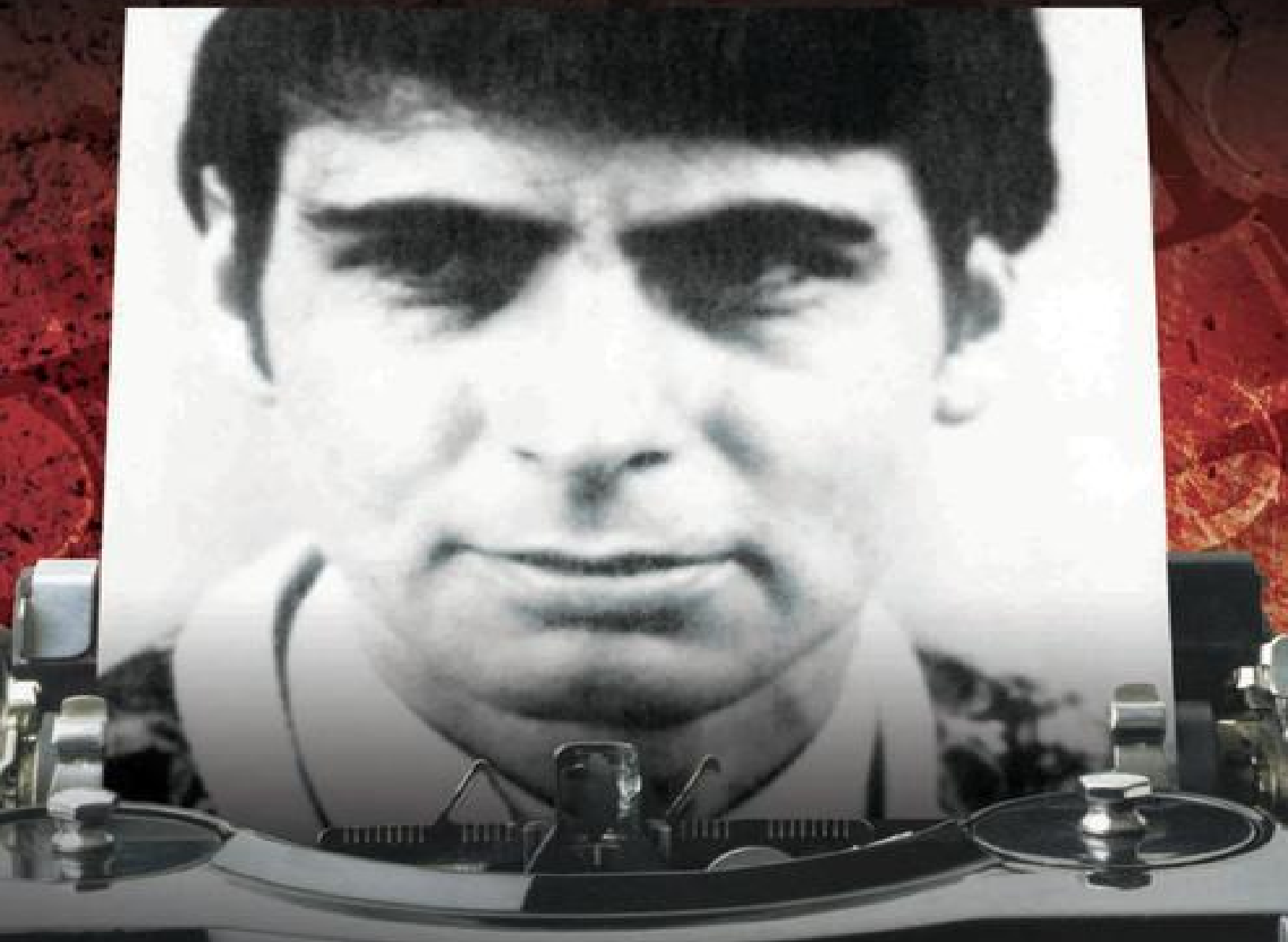
RUSS COFFEY



DENNIS NILSEN

CONVERSATIONS WITH BRITAIN'S MOST EVIL SERIAL KILLER

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JB
JOHN BLAKE

CONTENTS

Title Page
INTRODUCTION

1 9 FEBRUARY 1983
2 GROWING UP
3 PRISON LIFE – BRIXTON
4 OLD KIT BAG
5 PRISON LIFE – THE FIRST DECADE
6 ADRIFT IN LONDON
7 WHITEMOOR
8 FROM FANTASY TO MURDER
9 CRANLEY GARDENS
10 THE TRIAL
11 THE END OF THE ROAD

SOURCES AND REFERENCE MATERIAL
Plates
Copyright

INTRODUCTION

'History of a Drowning Boy unfolds as a tale of another flawed man who committed 12 homicides. It is certainly no whitewash of my life. I have written my past candidly.'
DENNIS NILSEN

The above lines were written to me in 2003 from HMP Full Sutton, Yorkshire, by Dennis Nilsen, one of Britain's most notorious serial killers. I had found myself exchanging letters with Nilsen while researching a magazine article about a half-written autobiography he wanted to have published. During our lengthy correspondence, prisoner B62006 would try to persuade me of new insights he had into his former behaviour. He wrote fluently and logically, interspersing his answers with personable comments. Sometimes, in fact, he presented himself so reasonably I had to remind myself what he had done.

Between 1978 and 1983, Dennis Andrew Nilsen murdered up to 15 young men. He met them in West End bars and then invited them back to his suburban London flat for further drinking and, possibly, sex. As they slept, he strangled them. The next morning, he would talk to the bodies. Once out of the flat, however, he would revert to his 'ordinary' self – quiet, neat and devoted to his pet dog.

It was this ability to act perfectly normally between the killings that enabled Nilsen to carry on killing for so long. During just over four years of murder, his colleagues at the Job Centre never noticed anything particularly alarming. They simply considered him to be shy and dull. There were some occasions, however, when his demeanour became a little unsettling. He could lose his temper quickly or become overbearing if the conversation turned to politics. On those occasions, even those who had tried to befriend him were struck by his intensity.

Nilsen was arrested on 9 February 1983, when fragments of human flesh blocking the drains of number 23 Cranley Gardens, Muswell Hill, were traced back to his flat. Inside, the police found the remains of three young men. The small, attic flat stank of death and neglect. The windows were

flung open to disperse the smell. One detective had to hang back by the door to avoid being sick.

Nilsen's manner was as surreal as the state of his flat. Quite nonchalantly, he confessed to being Britain's most prolific serial killer. He spoke calmly and continuously, explaining that many of his victims had been runaways whom he now wanted to help identify. The police interrogations were as bizarre as they were disturbing.

When the press reported the contents of Nilsen's confessions, these revelations sent a communal shiver up the nation's spine. But for some of the psychiatrists who worked on the case, Nilsen's behaviour in interviews made words like 'mad' and 'bad' seem utterly inadequate. They believed that his actions stemmed from extremely complex personality problems.

Many years later, academics and other writers would also attempt explanations of what had gone on. In March 2012, one psychologist who knows Nilsen well, Matthew Malekos, published a controversial 300-page thesis that invited readers to consider whether, in prison, the killer may have actually psychologically 'recovered'.

But, even if that were so, recovered from what? He hadn't been deemed to be insane, so what was he? What were his drives and motives? Did he really have an emotional disorder or was he simply a psychopath? The title of one successful book on the case, *Killing for Company*, suggested Nilsen seemed, in part, to want companionship from his victims. Newer theories appear in TV documentaries every couple of years.

Part of this interest is just macabre fascination. But there is also the fact that so many of the details derive from the killer himself. Even before his trial, Nilsen wrote hundreds of essays in which he attempted to comprehend his psychology. During 30 subsequent years in prison, Nilsen has continued to attempt a dialogue with the outside world.

Part of his motivation is undoubtedly self-publicity. But might there also be more to it? Nilsen's autobiography, after all, *seems* to show some real desire to understand his killing urges. It is now several thousand pages long and has been seen by only four people, including me. For years, Nilsen dreamed of having it published.

His ambitions were quashed in the late nineties when the prison authorities realised what he was up to. The working draft, *History of a Drowning Boy*, was confiscated. In the years that followed, Nilsen used

legal aid to take the prison service to court to get his book back so that he could finish it. In 2011, the *Daily Record* estimated that his trips to the courts had probably cost the tax payer £65,000.

I first contacted Nilsen after reading a newspaper article about his manuscript. Like many journalists who have written to him, I was on a routine search for stories. He responded quickly and, soon, his letters became a regular fixture in my life. I had, initially, expected to find corresponding with him disturbing in an immediate way. But Nilsen's written persona was, on the surface, amusing and charming.

He wanted me to inform the nation that he was ready to tell all. Through a friend of his, he gave me full access to his writing. As a result of what I was shown, in 2003 the *Sunday Times* magazine commissioned a cover feature called *Memoirs of a Serial Killer.* While writing it, I discovered to my surprise that, while most people found the idea of the autobiography revolting, there were some who believed he was worth listening to. The authorities, however, were consistent in their line that his manuscript was pornographic and outrageous.

Still, Nilsen remained adamant he had worthwhile things to say. Just before one court hearing, he wrote to me: 'I am not contained, mute and immobile in a glass jar as some kind of eternal official specimen of popular "evil". As I am alive, I must live as a man.'

'Living as a man', for Nilsen, meant being able to read and write. Being able to fulfil himself was a lot more than his victims could ever do. And therein lies the crux of the moral problem presented by Nilsen's writing. Clearly, to be in the public interest, Nilsen's book would need to be more than just amateur self-analysis. At the very least, it would need to provide a very rare insight into the workings of a killer's mind. It would need to explain convincingly why he did what he did.

After his trial, Nilsen confessed to his biographer, Brian Masters, that he simply enjoyed killing. Now he wants to retract that and offer a more psychologically complete answer. He wrote to me: 'I was under constant pressure from almost everyone I spoke to, to admit that I had enjoyed killing. After my trial, in order to give Brian Masters a "happy" ending to his book on me, I wrote to him saying I probably did enjoy it. I was

grasping for an explanation, a certainty, instead of leaving the whole sorry conundrum hanging diffused in the air.'

When I read those lines they simply struck me as evasive. Yet, when I read his full manuscript it seemed *History of a Drowning Boy* offered something of greater interest; at least for those with the stomach to read it. It was not just *what* he said that seemed revealing, but also the way in which he said it.

Nilsen's overall story is predictable – a self-pitying tale of growing up like 'a dog that had never been patted', and then turning into a dysfunctional 'lone wolf'. The details, however, are more telling. In the passages where he explores his sexual imagination, the prose is thick with fantasy and detail. Still, these words need very careful interpretation. Nilsen focuses just on what interests him and often changes his story. Without points of comparison, his writing is often frighteningly misleading.

The book you are reading explains both what Nilsen has to say, and also tries to put it in context. To do so, I have drawn on many years of research. These include interviews with victims, police and others who knew him.

The archives of Nilsen's writing run into several boxes' worth. When I was first loaned *History of a Drowning Boy* back in 2003 – at the time of the *Sunday Times* magazine project – it comprised four volumes: 'Orientation in Me'; 'After the Feast'; 'A Long Way Down and Rising' (about his time in Wakefield and Albany Prisons); and 'Whitemoor: A Volume of Extremes'. Since these, Nilsen has written more volumes, copious essays, and has continued to write letters to me on the clear understanding that I might one day use these, and his unpublished manuscript, to write more about his work. Such professional interest in his autobiography has formed the basis of our correspondence. In the following chapters, material from these letters, and the manuscript, has been interwoven with my own words and with information from other sources to give a sense of what I believe Nilsen's finished autobiography would look like. Naturally, emphasis has been put on the most psychologically significant aspects.

There can surely never be any definitive answers as to why Dennis Nilsen did what he did. So why write another book about the man and the case? Many may feel that people like Nilsen are best forgotten about; they are

evil-doers whose stories are macabre and possibly corrupting. A more liberal and rationalist approach, however, might be to say that Nilsen and others like him represent a problem that society has to confront. He himself says, 'I lived with and among you all.' That much is true. And if his evil-doing stemmed from psychological disorders that went unnoticed, we surely need to know as much as we can about their origin and nature. Despite all the interest in serial killers over the past 30 years, little is understood about how their internal world drives their exterior behaviour. We need to know more.

In addition to looking at Nilsen's explanations for his crimes, this book is also concerned with the way in which he has tried to tell his story. How has he managed to get people to listen? What does this say about us? And what exactly is it that people find so interesting about the case? Finally, it is essential that Nilsen's story be seen constantly in conjunction with the perspective of his victims. Where possible, I have spoken to those who have been directly affected by his horrific crimes.

Ultimately, it is up to the reader to make up his or her own mind about Nilsen's writing. To that end, I have been careful to present the material clearly – both Nilsen's own accounts and also the testimony of those who have known him. In particular, it would have been impossible to present a clear and balanced account without the help of DCI Peter Jay, victim Carl Stottor, victim's son Shane Levene, Scotland Yard's Crime Museum, and authors Brian Masters and Gordon Honeycombe.

Russ Coffey, May 2013

1

9 FEBRUARY 1983

'I accept moral responsibility and guilt and punishment which the law and justice demands. It has been thus since the moment of invited arrest in that top flat at 23 Cranley Gardens in that snow-driven evening in February 1983.'
DENNIS NILSEN, IN A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR

Over the years, the story of how Dennis Nilsen was arrested has been told and retold until it has acquired a ring of modern folklore. It goes like this:

On Thursday, 3 February 1983, residents of 23 Cranley Gardens, in the north London suburb of Muswell Hill, found their drains were blocked. They called a drainage engineer from Dyno-Rod. His second visit was on Wednesday, 9 February, a particularly freezing cold day. After careful thought, he concluded that pieces of flesh and bones were causing the blockage. Unsure if they were animal or human, he decided to call the police.

Three officers arrived in a squad car. After peering down the manhole, all agreed something wasn't right. They fished the pieces of grey matter out from beneath the manhole cover and took them to the lab. An hour later, the pathologist confirmed them as human. In the mortuary, the detectives knew they were dealing with something hugely significant … and particularly grim.

They returned to Cranley Gardens. An inspection of the outside of the building seemed to indicate that the flesh had come from a pipe that led to the top flat. The neighbours told them that the man who lived there was peculiar and that he should be back from work in about an hour. DCI Peter Jay said they would wait. Rubbing their hands to keep warm, the three men discussed what they knew about Nilsen – his name, age, and that he worried his neighbours. Still, they had little idea of what he might be like. How

might a man who had possibly been chopping up bodies and flushing them down the toilet react to arrest?

Nilsen was also waiting. He had spent the afternoon at work mentally preparing himself for his arrest. Since leaving for work that morning, he been quite convinced the game was up. He knew the body parts he'd been flushing down the toilet were still blocking the plumbing.

When Nilsen finally returned to his flat, the police had moved into the warmth of the lobby. Nilsen opened the door to find DCI Jay staring at him. He knowingly returned his gaze. Jay began by asking about the plumbing.

In his calm Scottish voice, Nilsen replied, 'Since when were the police interested in people's drains?'

The policemen suggested they take the conversation upstairs. In the flat, Jay explained about the human remains.

'How awful!' exclaimed Nilsen.

Jay nervously snapped, 'Stop messing around … where's the rest of the body?'

Then, in a matter-of-fact way, Nilsen took them to the damp, cold front room and opened one of the wardrobes where he had stored bodies. He said he had much more to tell and wanted to do it at the station.

In the car back to Hornsey Police Station, the detectives asked their prisoner what it was he wanted to tell them. Had he killed two men?

'Fifteen or sixteen over four years,' was Nilsen's reply. That made him the most prolific multiple killer yet discovered in the UK. And just like in the movies, he was quiet, intelligent and personable. His writing still often is.

In his version of those events above, however, Nilsen changes the emphasis so that it is he at the centre, looking for 'help'. He says the police were unsure of themselves. It was he, he says, who finally tired of concealing his 'problem' and who led the police each step of the way with his sudden, immediate and full co-operation.

Either way, the stark truth was that three young men had been senselessly murdered in that particular flat. At least nine had been killed in another. As Cranley Gardens was a top-floor flat and Nilsen didn't have a car, it had become inevitable that he would soon be caught. Nilsen even says that he deliberately 'invited' arrest by his activities. There is no evidence for that.

What the police did find plenty of evidence for was that Nilsen suffered from a severe and dangerous personality disorder. The pot on the stove had been used to boil a human head, and the odour of death hung thick throughout the flat. In the wardrobe were bin bags filled with the remains of a Scottish youth called Steven Sinclair. Nilsen had killed him two weeks earlier, and now he wanted to explain everything.

The way he did so was distinctive. He talked almost as if he had been in love with Sinclair. In one notebook, Nilsen wrote, 'I stood in great grief and a wave of utter sadness as if someone very dear to me had just died.'

The line was written next to an ink drawing of the corpse called 'The Last Time I Saw Stephen Sinclair'. The juxtaposition seemed quite mad. The affection he claimed to have felt for the young man was matched with a vile disregard for his body. The torso had been cut down the middle and was separated into two halves. The lower part of the body had been removed with a clean cut from just above the waist. The eyes had been boiled in their sockets. When the pieces were re-assembled on the mortuary slab, they had turned different colours.

Stephen Sinclair was typical of those Nilsen would bring home. He was the sort whose story interests no one, and the kind of young man that Nilsen felt he could take under his wing. Sinclair was 20 years old and only 5ft-5in tall. He had come down from Scotland, travelling without a ticket on the InterCity Express from Edinburgh to London's King's Cross. Like many of the runaways who arrived at that station, he had come with little more than a vague feeling that the big city had something for everyone, even him.

Sinclair met his killer on Wednesday, 26 January. Nilsen isn't sure exactly where. In one version, it was in a pub called the Royal George in Goslett Yard near Denmark Street where he had once worked. One witness, however, thought he saw Sinclair hanging around with someone fitting Nilsen's description some days before. So, despite what he says, Nilsen, did, quite possibly, mark Sinclair out as a potential victim beforehand.

Another, more likely, account has them meeting by the slot machines off Piccadilly Circus. This was then a well-known gay 'cruising' area where older men would try to pick up rent boys or runaways looking for money. Dressed in a leather jacket, tight black jeans and with tattoos on his hands

and arms, Sinclair would have hardly stood out. As a well-spoken man in his late thirties, neither would Nilsen.

Nilsen was 6ft 1in, slim, dark-haired and good-looking despite his oversized glasses and functional suit. We know from victims who escaped, that his manner when picking people up was usually friendly but dominating. The conversation between him and Sinclair was therefore probably one-sided, with their shared knowledge of eastern Scotland helping it along. As they chatted, Nilsen would have appeared sympathetic and kind, and would have spoken with complete confidence as if he knew everything about everything. He found Sinclair attractive, especially approving of the fact that he was small and fair – two of his physical preferences. Nilsen cared less for the fact that he was a delinquent and a drug addict.

Sinclair would have seemed like a safe bet. Not only was he a runaway but he had also just been in trouble. He had been being caught stealing at a St Mungo's hostel and bailed to appear before magistrates on Monday, 12 February. It was hardly the first time Sinclair had got himself into bother. In fact, he'd rarely been out of trouble since he was born Stephen Guild in 1962.

He was illegitimate and was soon taken into the custody of the local authorities. After 14 months he was put up for foster care, and came into the home of Neil and Elizabeth Sinclair who adopted him to be a brother to their three daughters. Stephen Sinclair, however, wet his bed and constantly bunked off school. Things became so bad that a doctor's advice was sought. It transpired that he had psycho-motor epilepsy.

He was then institutionalised until he was 12. By his mid-teens, he was also diagnosed as educationally sub-normal and spent time in Borstal. He soon graduated to prison. When he got out, things became worse. On one occasion, he slashed his wrists and, on another, he attacked his sisters. There was also an occasion when he tried to burn the house down.

Eventually, Sinclair was re-fostered into a new family. But the same old problems rose to the surface. As he turned 18, he was a drug addict, a glue sniffer and a recognised, opportunist criminal. At this time, though, there is no particular indication he was homosexual.

Wherever they met, we know that, very soon afterwards, Nilsen invited the young man on a tour of the West End pubs. He bought him anything he

cared to drink and insisted on being called ‘Des’, explaining he hated the name Dennis. At closing time – 11.30pm – Nilsen suggested they go back to his flat for more alcohol.

In *History of a Drowning Boy*, he describes their journey home. They took the Northern Line up to Highgate. Sinclair had started feeling sleepy. As they got off, Nilsen noticed his companion was becoming woozier. During the mile or so walk back to his flat, Nilsen says he doubted he ‘understood a word he said in his half-drugged Scots brogue’.

Muswell Hill was a pleasant, leafy area where urban London dissolved into greenery and space. Most of the large, semi-detached houses remained intact as family homes for genteel and affluent city workers. 23 Cranley Gardens, a tall Edwardian house with Mock Tudor beams, was different. Later, when it appeared under the headline ‘HOUSE OF HORRORS’, it looked every bit the part. The house had been split into small bed-sits. There were tiles missing and the paint was flaking off. The landlady lived in India and the agents were in Golders Green. Tenants came and went without getting to know each other. In particular, the strange man living in the attic kept himself to himself.

In the dark, cold and full of drink, Stephen Sinclair was unlikely to have paid particular attention to the outside of the building. Once inside, they went up two flights of stairs and, when Nilsen opened the door, Bleep – his small, black-and-white cross-breed dog – jumped up and licked their hands. The flat was smelly, small and damp. As Sinclair walked in, he would have seen a grimy gas stove in small galley kitchen to his left. It adjoined the hall. The bathroom was opposite. The cooker, cooking pot and bath have now been preserved in Scotland Yard’s ‘Black Museum’ as a permanent reminder of the state of mind of the man who owned them.

Ahead of the kitchen was a door leading to the front room. This led to the other main room, the bedroom, in which was a double bed, a comfortable armchair, a stereo, the TV, posters, plants and a scented candle. The room at the front was not used. It contained a large wardrobe and some tea chests. It had been reported that, no matter what the weather, the windows were flung wide open.

There are a number of accounts of what happened next. Even before writing *History of a Drowning Boy*, Nilsen gave two versions. The first was his

confession to the police. He told DCI Jay that when they came in and put on the television, he was pleased to see the working-class drama *Boys from the Blackstuff* being broadcast. The programme appealed to his socialist ideals. Sinclair sat on the floor and Nilsen in the armchair. They watched the programme while drinking the alcohol they had picked up on the way.

Towards the end, Nilsen noticed that Sinclair had disappeared to the corner of the room to inject himself with drugs. That disappointed Nilsen. He put The Who's *Tommy* on his stereo. With his headphones tightly clasped to his ears, he says that he listened to all 75 minutes before dozing off. In a police statement later, he claimed, 'I can't remember anything else until I woke up the next morning. He was still in the armchair and he was dead. On the floor was a piece of string with a tie attached to it … I know I must have killed him … I must have made up the piece of string that night. I don't know.'

Months later, after the trial, Nilsen wrote an account for author Brian Masters, which is reproduced in his book, *Killing for Company* (extracts of which are reproduced in this book by special permission). Here, he let his memories flow as if reliving the moment:

> *I am sitting cross-legged on the carpet, drinking and listening to music ... I drain my glass and take the 'phones off. Behind me sits Stephen Sinclair on the lazy chair. He was crashed out with drink and drugs. I sit and look at him. I stand up and approach him. My heart is pounding. I kneel down in front of him. I touch his leg and say, 'Are you awake?' There is no response. 'Oh, Stephen,' I think, 'here I go again.' I get up and go slowly and casually through to the kitchen. I take some thick string from the drawer and put it on the stainless-steel draining board. 'Not long enough,' I think. I go to the cupboard in the front room and search inside.*
>
> *On the floor therein I find an old tie. I cut a bit off and throw the rest away. I go back into the kitchen and make up the ligature. I look into the back room and Stephen has not stirred. Bleep comes in and I speak to her and scratch her head. 'Leave me just now, Bleep. Get your head down, everything's all right.'*
>
> *I was relaxed. I never contemplated morality. This was something which I had to do. I knotted the string because I heard somewhere*

that this was what the thuggi did in India for a quicker kill. I walked back into the room. I draped the ligature over one of his knees and poured myself another drink. My heart was pounding very fast. I sat on the edge of the bed and looked at Stephen. I thought to myself, 'All that potential, all that beauty, and all that pain that is his life. I have to stop him. It will soon be over.'

I did not feel bad. I did not feel evil. I walked over to him. I removed the scarf. I picked up one of his wrists and let go. His limp arm flopped back on to his lap. I opened one of his eyes and there was no reflex. He was deeply unconscious. I took the ligature and put it around his neck. I knelt by the side of the chair and faced the wall. I took each loose end of the ligature and pulled it tight ...

I held him there for a couple of minutes. He was limp and stayed that way. I released my hold and removed the string and tie. He had stopped breathing. I spoke to him. 'Stephen, that didn't hurt at all. Nothing can touch you now.' I ran my fingers through his bleached blond hair. His face looked peaceful. He was dead. The front of his jeans was wet with urine ... I got up and had a drink and a cigarette. He had made no noise; I had to wash his soiled body. I ran a bath ... I returned and began to undress him. I took off his leather jacket, jersey and T-shirt. Then his running shoes and socks. I had difficulty with his tight, wet jeans. He still sat there, now naked, in the armchair ... his body was pale and hairless. He had crêpe bandages on both forearms. I removed these to reveal deep, still open, recent razor cuts. He had very recently tried to commit suicide ...

I picked up his limp body into my arms and carried it into the bathroom. I put it into the half-filled bath. I washed the body ... I sat him on the white-and-blue dining chair. I sat down, took a cigarette and a drink and looked at him ... His eyes were not quite closed. 'Stephen,' I thought, 'you're another problem for me. What am I going to do with you? I've run out of room.'

The next morning ... I lay beside him and placed the large mirror at the end of the bed. I stripped ... and lay there staring at both our naked bodies in the mirror. He looked paler than I did ... I put talcum powder on myself and lay down again. We looked similar now. I spoke to him as if he were still alive ... I thought how beautiful he

looked and how beautiful I looked … He just looked fabulous. I just stared at us both in the mirror. Soon I felt tired. I got in between the sheets …

'Goodnight, Stephen,' I said, switched off the bedside light and went to sleep. I was up a few hours later. It was an ordinary day of work for me ahead.

That 'ordinary day' at work was as an executive officer at the nearby Kentish Town Job Centre. Nilsen had been in the job for less than a year. For the previous seven years, he had worked in a junior role at the Denmark Street Job Centre. Prior to that he had been a security guard, a policeman (for eight months) and a cook in the Army. But although he had joined the Army aged 15, he still seemed highly educated. This is what had struck many of his colleagues when they first met him. He was quiet and bookish until the conversation turned to one of his pet subjects, like left-wing politics. Then he would quickly become verbose and, sometimes, domineering.

Nilsen's extensive knowledge could also make him interesting. But his inability to know when to stop talking meant that, more often than not, he was a bit of a bore. Still, Nilsen often made his workmates laugh. He had a sharp, dry wit and never missed a copy of the satirical magazine, *Private Eye*. He still subscribes to it in prison.

For the fortnight between murdering Stephen Sinclair and his arrest, Nilsen continued normally at work. He interviewed applicants and complained about Margaret Thatcher. But although for the first week he was his usual businesslike self, after that he started to become fractious.

Nilsen's most vivid recollections of the last week before his arrest are not to be found in *History of a Drowning Boy* but in essays he wrote for author Brian Masters, and which were later quoted in *Killing for Company* – the result of an extraordinary relationship of trust between subject and writer. The project began when Masters wrote to Nilsen while he was awaiting trial asking for co-operation in studying his case. He was one of two writers who did so. The other, ex-ITN newscaster Gordon Honeycombe, had recently written about some of the Met Police's most famous cases in *Murders of the Black Museum*. That, clearly, made him well qualified on the subject. Masters, however, had a CV ranging from

biographies on Sartre to Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, and Nilsen apparently felt that a man of such sensibilities would be better suited to understand him.

Over the next year, Nilsen filled 55 prison-issue exercise books with thoughts and feelings for Masters. He wrote in incredible detail, and with apparent candour. He began by speaking about was what had happened at his first flat – how he had burnt bones on bonfires and put flesh out by the fence for the rats. He then proceeded to explain how the problems of getting rid of the bodies at the second flat led to his arrest.

From all available sources, this is what happened in the last seven days leading up to Dennis Nilsen's arrest: Jim Allcock, a builder, lived on the ground floor of 23 Cranley Gardens with his girlfriend, a local barmaid. Two other girls lived on the same floor and the middle storey of the building was unoccupied. On Thursday, 3 February, Allcock noticed that his toilet didn't work. He tried removing the blockage but it wouldn't clear. The next day, he decided to call the management agents.

Early on the morning of 4 February, Allcock noticed his other toilet didn't work either. When he spoke to the agents, he requested to be put directly in touch with a plumber. But now he also wondered if it was just his flat. So when his girlfriend, Fiona Bridges, bumped into Nilsen, she asked if he was also having a problem with his toilet. He replied he wasn't. Bridges also noticed that he had been drinking. That wasn't unusual.

Nilsen had actually gone to the pub to prepare himself for the process of getting rid of the 'problem' he had in his flat. He says this was a practice he found distressing and his solution was to get drunk and force himself to do what was necessary. First, Sinclair's body was removed from one of the wardrobes. Then he made sheets from bin liners and put them down on the narrow kitchen floor. Finally, while still drinking Bacardi and Coke, Nilsen set about cutting up the body with a set of sharp chef's knives.

On the hob sat a huge, steel cooking pot, similar to those he'd used in the Army Catering Corps. Its purpose was to soften the tissue sufficiently to enable it to be flushed down the loo. The water took a full half-hour to come to the boil, by which time Nilsen had got the head off and started to remove the innards. The organs smelt terrible, but the body, thankfully, wasn't particularly messy. Nilsen says he couldn't stand the sight of blood,

and was always relieved how little there was after a body had settled for a few days. By midnight, he was too drunk to finish.

When he went to bed, he still hadn't made any connection between him and the drainage problems his neighbours were complaining about.

The following Saturday morning – 5 February – suffering from a bad hangover, Nilsen decided to lie in. Meanwhile, the plumber had started inspecting the toilets and drains outside. He concluded that the blockage was a job for specialists. A call was put through to Dyno-Rod, but they informed him that they couldn't send an engineer around until the following Monday. When Bridges and Allcock saw Nilsen leaving the house in the early afternoon, they told him it might be better if he didn't use the toilet in his flat.

Now Nilsen started to worry that his activities were causing the blockage. He decided to do something about the mess and bought cleaning products and air fresheners before returning home.

That afternoon, by chance, Nilsen's sometime friend, Martyn Hunter-Craig, popped round. He says Nilsen looked more agitated than ever before. When Nilsen opened his door a fraction, Hunter-Craig could see his friend's face was a ghostly white.

'You can't come in, Skip,' Nilsen said, 'I'm tied up with someone.'

Hunter-Craig describes smelling what he calls an unusual 'lavatorial' smell which he thought might be vomit. He assumed Nilsen was drunk and probably in a complex sexual situation. As a former male prostitute, Hunter-Craig was used to seeing all kinds of things, and discreetly ignoring them.

Nilsen devoted the whole of Sunday to cleaning up. He finished cutting up the body, and put the parts in bin liners. Then these and the partially boiled head were covered with newspapers and stick deodorants.

On Monday, 7 February, Nilsen went to work feeling on edge. He was irritable and curt with his colleagues. He was resigned to the distinct possibility that when he came home the police would be waiting for him. But Dyno-Rod had failed to turn up and matters hadn't escalated. Nilsen went to bed that night wondering if he might yet be able to escape detection.

The following morning, Nilsen again went to work in a tense mood. When he returned, it was sleeting. Mike Cattran, a 30- year-old engineer

from Dyno-Rod had just arrived. Nilsen went straight up to his flat. Cattran went down to a manhole cover at the side of the building along with Jim Allcock. Cattran looked down, looked back up at Jim Allcock, and said, 'I haven't been in this job for long but I know this isn't shit.' He suspected the matter was from a rotting animal, but couldn't be sure what, or how it had come to be there in such quantities. At 7.00pm he phoned his manager, Gary Wheeler.

His manager's first reaction, as reported, sounded like it may have come from a 1970s TV show. He asked if there were Pakistanis in the building. Cattran replied that there weren't but that he had concerns that someone was doing something untoward. They agreed to leave it until the next day.

By now Nilsen had come down to see what was going on. Along with the occupants of the ground floor – Allcock, Bridges and two more – they listened to the engineers discuss what they had seen. Allcock said he wanted to know exactly what was causing the blockage. Cattran replied that he needed to look in daylight, and not to worry – there was probably a perfectly innocent explanation. He turned to Nilsen and asked him, 'Do you flush dog food down the pan?' Nilsen replied that he didn't.

Nilsen went back to his flat and wrote a letter to the agents complaining about the state of the building, including the drains. He asked that 'routine upkeep and maintenance' of the house be attended to, to keep 'living standards at a tolerable level'. He moaned about the lights in the communal areas before arriving at the important issue: 'When I flush my toilet, the lavatory pans in the lower flats overflow (since Friday, 4 February). Obviously the drains are blocked and unpleasant odours permeate the building.'

This wasn't the first time that he had written such a letter. Complaining was part of his nature. His real intention here, however, isn't clear. Maybe by complaining he could deflect attention. Or maybe, as he told me, he really was 'inviting the end' of his career as a murderer.

After writing his letter, Nilsen came down to find that Cattran was still there. Before he left, the three men at the house all took a look down the manhole together. Seeing how much the matter looked like flesh, Cattran remarked, 'Looks like one for the Old Bill'.

'It looks more to me like someone has been flushing down their Kentucky Fried Chicken,' Nilsen replied. Again, he returned to his flat to

consider his options.

When Nilsen later told the police about his thoughts that night, his words were carefully chosen. He said he had first wondered if he should run. But where could he go? As a former policeman he knew that he wouldn't get very far. Besides, he claims to have thought it cowardly. Then, he says he contemplated suicide, but this scared him. He paused for a moment. Then he continued to say that he was concerned that if he wrote a suicide note, no one would believe what he would have to say. Besides, he wanted to face the music because he 'owed it' to 'all the others' to let their families know what had happened.

Nilsen was also worried about his little, one-eyed mongrel. Although he says he possesses a lifelong 'genius' for being isolated from others, it was different with animals. He told the police he didn't want to let her down. Sadly for Nilsen, Bleep was eventually put down after contracting an illness while waiting to be re-homed by Battersea Dogs Home.

Whatever Nilsen was thinking, his thoughts would have been seriously affected by the rum and Coke he was knocking back. Around midnight, Dennis Nilsen decided to deal with the drain problem at its source. He went down to the manhole cover and cleared some of the 'particles of white flesh', disposing of them over the hedge in the back garden. Then he remembered what he'd said to Cattran about the chicken pieces. In the morning, he would go to Kentucky Fried Chicken and replace what he had removed with thighs and wings. Surely, he thought, everyone would lose interest?

When Wednesday, 8 February came, Nilsen never did buy that chicken. He had been spotted that night going outside by Jim Allcock, who questioned him. Nilsen said he'd been outside for a pee. Allcock didn't believe him. He and Bridges had listened to their neighbour bang and clatter with the manhole cover for ten minutes. All the time, Allcock held a large spanner in his hand. Later, they heard Nilsen repeatedly trying to flush the toilet on the landing.

In the morning, they heard him leave at approximately 7.30am. Cattran arrived with his boss Wheeler about an hour later. The only tenant left in the building now was Fiona Bridges. Cattran took his boss over to the manhole, lifted the cover and shone a torch down. The flesh had gone.

Cattran was bewildered. He told Wheeler that he was in no doubt about what he had seen the night before. The men walked over to the front of the house where Bridges was standing in the doorway in her dressing gown. When they told her about the mysterious disappearance, she explained what she and Allcock had seen the night before. All three of them went back to the drain and Cattran reached in. He pulled out what looked like a human knuckle, and then three more pieces of flesh and bone. Then they called the police.

Nilsen was now sure this was going to be his last day at work. He placed a note in his desk. It said that if he were to be reported to have committed suicide, it should not be believed – someone would have killed him. Despite having been a police constable, Nilsen was paranoid about authority. Then he suddenly became quite cheerful. He would tell Masters that it felt like a burden had been lifted; he was 'tired and prepared for what lay ahead,' and also 'sickened by the past, the present, and a doubtful future'. As he left the office, he put on his new, bright-blue-and-white scarf. Some colleagues commented on it. It, in fact, had belonged to Stephen Sinclair.

A brief summary of the events preceding the arrest appears in *History of a Drowning Boy*. In the main, however, Nilsen seems satisfied with how the events of those five drama-filled days have already been told. It's hardly surprising, as much of the commonly-told story actually derives from his own confessions. Now, Nilsen doesn't seem particularly interested in adding more to his thoughts and feelings. Significantly, he doesn't complain, as he does so frequently, that he has been misrepresented.

The reason soon becomes clear. Nilsen's priority in writing his book seems not to re-write the well-known stories about him, but to 'correct' what he believes to be the misconceptions about the overview of his life. In letters he told me how he wanted to demonstrate the 'human' aspect of his past and to show how a potentially 'viable human being' developed a desire to kill.

He says he needs to do so because he believes that, despite the quantity of material that has been written on the case, no one has actually understood his psychological make-up. Most of the analysis he has read in the press he dismisses as sensationalist nonsense. Of greater concern to him is his belief

that the one ‘serious’ study on his case, Brian Masters’ *Killing for Company*, published in 1995, missed ‘so many insightful clues’.

If Masters had indeed missed certain ‘clues’ it was not for a lack of possible material. During the project, he had got to know his subject personally in the way that a documentary maker or anthropologist might have done. For a further eight years after publication Masters continued to visit Nilsen out of both a sense of obligation and professional interest. During this period, Nilsen gave him the impression he had welcomed his insights. But towards the end of this period, Nilsen began to feel Masters was exploiting his life story.

In the early 1990s, Nilsen turned against both the author and his book. ‘*Killing for Company* is so pretentious,’ he later wrote to me, ‘that it disappears into the contradictions of its own confused academic fog. With *History of a Drowning Boy* comes the rain.’

Nilsen began to compose his first draft in Albany Prison in 1992. He had been prompted to write by a letter from an American psychiatrist. He had also found that under the influence of a (claimed) easy supply of marijuana, he found he could look back on his life with greater clarity.

Initially, over a period of several weeks, Nilsen wrote late into the night while his budgie, Hamish, flapped around his cell. The first thing he wrote about was his earliest memories growing up in the far north-east of Scotland. What was particularly striking was the emphasis Nilsen placed on the poor relationship he had with perhaps the most influential person throughout his formative years – his mother.

2

GROWING UP

'My mother suffocated me like a boa constrictor.'
DENNIS NILSEN, IN A LETTER TO MATTHEW MALEKOS

In December 2010, Nilsen's mother, Betty Scott, died. She was 89. Some months later, I asked Nilsen if he knew about her death. His reply was typical. He wrote, 'I can tell you exactly when my mother died – it was 23 November 1945.' Similarly, the feeling that she'd been dead to him from the moment he was born runs throughout the first 50 pages of his autobiography.

To the outside world, however, Nilsen's mother seemed a warm, caring lady. Many journalists who travelled up to the village of Strichen, near Fraserburgh, on Scotland's far northeast tip to interview Scott, considered her a rather dear old sort; religious and quite unable to understand how the gentle boy she had raised could be associated with such awful things. Although these reporters only saw her public face, those who knew her better, such as Nilsen's biographer Brian Masters, agreed.

In her public statements, Betty Scott maintained it was for others to judge her son and that she would stick by him. Nilsen, however, never believed a word. It was all lies, he would say, designed to hide the truth of what a rotten mother she had been. In 1985, he ended their relationship with a letter.

Nilsen's and his mother's accounts of his childhood broadly agree on the facts. It was what was going on *behind* Dennis's eyes that he feels his mother never understood. Nilsen says he felt different, unlovable, and needing to hide what he thought and felt.

Betty Scott did notice her son was a little introverted but did not have the time to worry about it. There were five other children to look after. Besides, she thought Dennis would eventually find a niche to suit his artistic, sensitive temperament or maybe his love of animals. In the last 27

years of her life, however, Scott would spend her days trying to work out what had gone wrong. She drew nothing but blanks.

Dennis Nilsen spent many hours pondering the same question. Now he feels he has answers. He is not inherently evil, he says, but rather 'an ordinary man driven to extraordinary conclusions'. He is on a mission to make the world understand it was extreme psychological circumstances rather than the essential 'him' that had created a perfect storm in his head. Two out of the three psychiatrists at his trial also partly agreed. They argued he suffered from a variety of 'personality disorders'; a term for abnormalities of mind that fall short of being full psychotic illnesses.

Nilsen dismisses such psychiatric concepts as 'psychobabble'. He believes his crimes will only be fully understood by reading an account of his life story, told *his* way. This is what he claims *History of a Drowning Boy* to be: a serious enquiry, and not a 'whitewash' of his life.

There is one man who seems to agree with many of Nilsen's claims – Matthew Malekos, a 31-year-old psychologist living in Cyprus. They started corresponding in 2000, when Malekos was 18. Twelve years later, Malekos published a thesis on Nilsen called 'The Birth of Psychopathy: the Psychology of a Serial Killer' (2012). In the closing chapter, Malekos suggests that Nilsen's 'therapeutic' writing may have helped him conquer the factors that once made him a psychopath.

Nilsen doesn't explicitly go that far, but he still claims his book is a thorough 'investigation' into the 'recesses' of his mind, and he starts with his infancy. *History of a Drowning Boy* opens with: 'As the unique amalgam, in a new genetic configuration of contributions from a man and a woman, one is born into the world. Therefore at birth I was as different from other people in much the same way as my fingerprints were different from other people's.'

Although Nilsen accepts he was born 'different' from others, he will not concede his nature should have *necessarily* caused his later problems. 'It was not these differences which spawned destructive behaviour later on in life,' he wrote to me in 2003, 'but an utter repudiation of them by my parents, peers and a conventional repressive society.'

The first chapter of Nilsen's manuscript elaborates on this sense of rejection. Olav Nilsen, his father, had been virtually absent since his birth. Yet, although Nilsen clearly resents his lack of a father figure, it is his

feelings towards his mother which dominate his thoughts. On the first page of his book, he even complains bitterly about how she treated him when he was just a tiny baby.

In 1946, life was hard for everyone in the small Scottish fishing town of Fraserburgh, which had been hit hard by the war. For the residents of the top flat in 47 Academy Road, things were particularly austere. The living space was terribly cramped. Nilsen's grandparents lived in one bedroom and Nilsen, his mother and brother in another. Nilsen says it was a cold, uncaring, dour and religious environment.

As a baby, Nilsen thinks he was especially sensitive to the unemotional atmosphere that surrounded him. He says he has reason to believe his mother and grandmother would pass him around like an 'unpleasant object'. There were no loving hands, he laments, but rather, he says, he was 'acted upon' in 'rituals' of 'carrying, stripping, bathing, powdering, dressing and laying out', by 'strong and towering powers'.

Nilsen says because his world consisted of harsh, domineering women, his first emotional connections were weak. More importantly, he says the way his body was bathed and changed in a 'ritualistic' way profoundly affected his basic emotional and sexual needs. Then he makes an explosive assertion which sets up his entire story. He speculates whether the rituals he later performed on the dead bodies of his victims – the compulsion to dress, undress and wash the victim's corpses – were, in fact, all re-enactments of scenes from his infancy. Somehow, he feels, the emotional deprivation of early childhood had imprinted itself on to his sexual subconscious.

This concept needs further explanation. It's not only absurd to think imperfect mothering, alone, could have had such a catastrophic effect, but it also sounds as if he may be trying to fix the blame at such a distant past point in time that no one can argue. On the first point, Nilsen agrees that his earliest experiences weren't, in themselves, *sufficient* to corrupt his subconscious needs. The rest of his first chapter attempts to explain those other formative childhood events that he feels set his emotions down such a dark and disturbed track.

In order to understand Nilsen's developing psychology, it's crucial to appreciate how he feels about his birth town. Fraserburgh – also known as 'the Broch' – is a mid-sized fishing town 35 miles north of Aberdeen, in the

district of Buchan. The town centre is Victorian and grey. Most of these buildings are built of granite slabs which, in winter, can look like prison walls. Close by are dour housing estates. The harbour may be more colourful but it is decidedly functional.

Many residents feel trapped by the remoteness and sense of insularity (in recent years it has also been dubbed Scotland's heroin capital). Mother Nature doesn't help the sense of bleakness. The persistent winds whip up salt spray, the gulls are constantly screeching and, in winter, it seems dark all day long. But there is also a more uplifting side, especially when the sun shines. The surrounding land is of the kind that is perfect for golf links, and the beaches of Fraserburgh Bay are long and sandy. The natural surroundings can be quite spectacular. And that is the only positive thing Nilsen ever has to say about his birthplace.

Nilsen describes the Broch as a rain-lashed, cultural backwater full of bigots – some religious, others just rough. In one essay, he describes the freezing climate as 'magnified by the cold commanding calculation of other people'. He says he felt totally insignificant, and describes the emotions he felt as a child: 'Big people wore clothes in black and grey and they were forever issuing orders. I was one of the little people to be controlled and ordered about.' Then, in his essay called 'Feelings' (quoted by Matthew Malekos in his thesis), Nilsen gives a metaphor of reaching out to the world only to find his 'hand dirled by the sharp crack of somebody's thin hard stick'.

The stylised prose continues throughout. Nilsen says he was treated like a street dog, with an emotional life that was 'a world of cold maximum power and minimal warmth of close tactile love. I took my place in the line for processing. I was a few points above the status of street urchin.'

Despite the obvious exaggeration, the fact that similar accounts convinced psychiatrists at his trial indicate that Nilsen's words probably do reflect genuine feelings. The worst aspect of Aberdeenshire life, for him, was the sense of hardness and brutality. He observes it was a necessary character of the fishing trade which, when Nilsen grew up, generally thrived. The life of the fishermen was, he says, 'a harsh, uncompromising life constantly tacking close to the cold lips of sudden death'. But that didn't make it any easier for him to warm to them or they to him. As his

own brother said of Dennis, ‘Fraserburgh isn’t a very good place for a poofter.’

After Nilsen’s arrest, most locals – both from Fraserburgh and his second home town of Strichen – concluded that Dennis had been born with something ‘wrong’ in his brain. That belief persists today. Even apart from what he had done, it was not hard to believe that there might have been something wrong with him. And it was also the case that mental instability was not unknown within Nilsen’s own family – a great-aunt of his had spent most of her life in a mental asylum. It’s also true that generations of intermarrying meant that mental problems were, in fact, not uncommon in the area.

Dennis Nilsen, however, wasn’t a simple product of the local gene pool. His father Olav Nilsen, was a Norwegian resistance soldier who had come over during the Second World War. He had done so as a part of the British-organised ‘Shetland Bus’. The Nazis had occupied Norway since 1940, and in 1941 the British Secret Service set up an operation to bring key personnel over to the Shetland Islands or northern Scotland using Scottish fishing vessels. Olav Nilsen was one of those who made their way to northern Aberdeenshire. Fraserburgh, with its RAF bases, was a centre of military activity at the time. In fact, it was even nicknamed ‘Little London’ because of all the air-raids it had received. Other than how he arrived in Scotland, very little is known about Olav Nilsen.

Nilsen’s maternal line came from the Whyte family. His grandparents were Andrew and Lily. They were born in the 1890s into what he calls ‘poverty, hard work and danger’. They married young and they first set up home at Inverallochy, a small port near Fraserburgh. Later, they moved to Broadsea, a little way inland. Finally, they settled in Academy Road in Fraserburgh, where Dennis Nilsen was born and where he, his mother and siblings would live until 1954.

Academy Road, like much of Fraserburgh, was comprised of geometrically square, granite council houses terraced into four reasonably-sized flats. In ‘Feelings’, Nilsen describes them as ‘blockhouse-prim, solid and grim with a black smoke of hell spouting from the red clay chimney pots standing in neat rows over the grey slate roofs.’ Number 47 was at the end of one small terrace. The Whytes occupied the top flat.

It was an uninspiring place to live but the couple never aspired to more. Besides, they never had any money. Despite working all his life as a fisherman, Andrew Whyte failed to own his own boat. This meant he was dependent on other fisherman for his livelihood and, when times were lean in the town, he would be unemployed. He found claiming welfare shameful. When his wife had to supplement their social security money with cleaning work, that humiliated him even more.

Andrew would try to compensate by telling elaborate stories. Down at the harbour, he had quite a reputation. Back at home, though, he was careful not to let his story-telling get in the way of the family's spiritual life. God and the Bible were woven into their daily routine and it came as a great comfort to them when their daughter Betty, as a teenager, also became interested in the 'Faith Mission'. In her later years, Betty Scott would talk a lot about her faith. Dennis, however, remembers his mother's evangelicalism with scepticism. He thought, at heart, she was sensual rather than religious. In one letter to me, he moans, witheringly, that the only character trait they ever shared was a 'fondness for cock'.

Whether or not Betty Nilsen had a particularly flirtatious nature when Dennis was growing up, there is no doubt in her early twenties she turned many of the heads of the servicemen looking for relief from the war. As Fraserburgh became increasingly important as an RAF base, many local halls were commandeered as makeshift places of rest and recreation. On Fridays and Saturdays, romance happened quickly. Betty Whyte was petite with a delicate, pale face framed by brown hair, and would use all her youthful guile to sneak past her parents to get to social events. If it proved too hard to make it to the evening dos, she would try in the cafés during the afternoons.

This was how Betty Whyte met Sgt Olav Nilsen of the Norwegian Resistance. Olav was 6ft-2in tall, fair and rugged. He came over and rescued her from the unwanted attention of some RAF boys who had invited themselves to the table where she and her friend were sitting. Betty was won over by his gallant act and, afterwards, they walked off down the street together, hand in hand. It was March 1942 and she was 21.

They got married a couple of months later on 2 May. Things almost immediately started to go wrong. Olav soon left in search of more excitement and, no doubt, other women. And whatever military value he

might have had – no one seems to know – quickly expired. He ended up in a tobacco factory. This was entered as his profession on Dennis's birth certificate. He was also known for drinking heavily in the town's pubs. Betty stayed in her grandparents' flat. But despite the unconventional marriage, Olav still managed to father three children by Betty. The oldest was Olav junior; the youngest was Sylvia. In the middle was Dennis, born on 23 November 1945.

Olav senior took some interest in the eldest child but, otherwise, he didn't take any of his responsibilities seriously. Later, Dennis would discover 'Nilsen' wasn't even his real name. It was a pseudonym Olav had adopted for his Scottish adventure. Nilsen says this contributed to his poor sense of identity as a child.

During his first decade in prison, Nilsen would look back over these early years like a detective in search of clues. In letters, he told me how he suspected his mother had been hiding things from him. Eventually, he became convinced that Olav wasn't even his real dad. He thought that explained why he and his sister were treated differently, and how it was that, when Sylvia was born in 1948, Olav petitioned for divorce on the grounds of adultery. He believed that they had had a different father.

As Nilsen stewed over his origins, his bitterness about his relationship with his mother festered. Increasingly, he felt that all his life she had been hiding important information from him. 'Why will she not face me on any visit?' he demanded rhetorically in one letter to me. In another fit of pique, he wrote, 'Mrs Betty Scott is protecting herself from any hard and embarrassing questions in the future.' Later in the letter, Nilsen remembers his mother losing her cool and shouting, 'You wouldn't know your father if you met him in the street.' Why not, he wondered? There were plenty of photographs of him, after all.

The more Nilsen reflected on his relationship with his mother, the more theories he developed. One was that his very existence reminded her of an affair, or worse … maybe a rape. That, he thought, would, at least, explain his mother's reluctance to touch him and why she was so keen to dump him on the 'cold practicality' of Granny. Such thoughts helped Nilsen believe that his family really was partly to blame for his later problems. In a letter, he complained to me there was 'only one villain' in Brian Masters' *Killing*

for Company. His mother, he felt, should have been a close second, with his father not far behind. But of all the traumas Nilsen has given as reasons for his psychological warping, the one mentioned most often did not directly concern either.

For many years, Dennis Nilsen considered the death of his grandfather to be the defining event of his early life. The incident happened when he was almost six. At the time, the family was still living in the grandparents' flat. Nilsen remembers there being an unhappy atmosphere and continual arguments between mother and grandmother about how to look after the children. Even when things were quiet there was tension.

Grandad, however, exuded a kind of calm, masculine serenity. It drew Dennis to him. Everyone noticed how unusually close they were. In her last television interview, Nilsen's mother even held back a tear as she reminisced about how Dennis and Grandad would be seen walking around the town and looking at the boats in the harbour. She said at weekends they would fly kites down by the beach. Her heart was warmed by the sight of them together – it helped compensate for the lack of a real father.

In October of 1951, Whyte, uncharacteristically, started complaining of extreme tiredness. He quit choir and missed church, but still he carried on working. One day, we hear, he went out to sea looking particularly seasick. The next morning, he failed to appear up on the deck. His crewmates went to his bunk to wake him; they found him dead. It was 31 October and he was 62.

Nilsen first described this day soon after his arrest. It wasn't just the death, he said, but also the cold, emotionless way the news was broken to him that caused his emotional scars. One day he remembered running around amid the normal bustle of everyday life and the next his mother was telling him to go and see Grandad 'laid out' in his coffin.

Grandad's body was displayed in the front room. Apparently, no explanation was given as to what had happened nor to what it meant. Grandad just lay there in a cheap, plain, wooden box. In his book, Nilsen tells us the undertaker had dressed him in white long-johns and his weather-beaten face looked like it needed a shave. When little Dennis asked why he looked so strange, the response received was that it was because Grandad had 'gone to a better place'. Nilsen says this shocked and confused him. He

felt he was being asked to accept things he couldn't comprehend. Would he see his grandad again 'when he was better' he wondered? If not, then why did Grandad leave? What does it mean to be dead?

Nilsen's initial account led Brian Masters to conclude that seeing his dead grandfather started the boy's personality problems. He believes that while Grandad was laid out, death and love became fused in his mind. To make matters worse, simultaneously, his inner world became totally separated from his outward personality.

Nilsen encouraged this theory: 'My troubles started there,' he told Masters, 'it blighted my personality permanently. I have spent all my emotional life searching for my grandfather and, in my formative years, no one was there to take his place.' But now he says he previously overstated the importance of the event. Whereas it was once the defining event, now he is more inclined to consider it to be merely part of a jigsaw – the other elements were his poor mothering, the rejection of his difference by his contemporaries, misdirected sexuality and a sense of utter worthlessness.

There is also more to Nilsen's re-evalution of his grandad's passing than just readjusting its importance within a general scheme. His whole attitude towards the man has changed. Anyone familiar with the hazy memories of Grandad reproduced in *Killing for Company* would immediately notice a radical change in tone in his autobiography. His fond memories have all but disappeared. There's no 'being borne aloft on the tall, strong shoulders of my great hero and protector, my grandfather', or being rescued by Grandad's 'Magic Sponge'.

The reason for this change in attitude is that Nilsen now thinks there may have been more to his grandfather's apparent kindness than he realised as a little boy. After careful reflection, he believes his grandad may actually have been a 'hesitant' sexual abuser. This is reflected in the new accounts he gives in *History of a Drowning Boy*. For instance, he says, 'He would take me out on long walks over the sand dunes and golf links … On the dunes at the far end of the bay, near the stream flowing into the sea … he would take me out into the dark, slit-windowed pill box and take down my short pants and hold my penis and told me to urinate … Tired by the long journey, I would, invariably, fall asleep and be carried home … My conscious memory is of his strength and a feeling of comfort and security. These were my only real, one-to-one, personable physical contacts with

someone who took a beneficial interest in me. He may have been a tepid paedophile, but I do not remember him as threatening or oppressive.'

In a later chapter, Nilsen elaborates on his grandfather's 'special' interest in him. He wonders if, during the long walks he remembers so well, his grandfather may have drugged his tea, and possibly inserted his finger in his anus. He feels this might explain why, as a young boy, he was fixated with defecation. More recently, Nilsen has discussed his new memories in letters exchanged with psychologist Matthew Malekos. The conclusions have been that, as a young boy, and irrespective of any actual sexual abuse, Dennis had conflicting feelings of love and fear towards Grandad. Sometimes the old man could be fond but, on other occasions, he was tyrannical.

As such, young Dennis's feelings towards him may have been a mixture of love and hate. If so, Grandad's death would have prompted both grief and guilt. Malekos suggests that unresolved childhood feelings of 'control and domination' may even have been present in Nilsen's mind when he murdered. It's an intriguing idea, but without any corroboration as to another side to Andrew Whyte's character, it is pure speculation.

Once Grandad had died, it was Dennis's mum and granny who were left to bring up the three children. Nilsen's feelings towards his grandmother at this time are almost as ambivalent as those towards Grandad. In 1983, he wrote in *Killing for Company*:

> *...the wireless played 'Workers' Playtime', 'Have a Go' and 'Music While You Work', and while Mother went about her seemingly endless washing and housework she sang along with all the popular tunes. The open coal fire burned in the grate with a folding metal guard over it, with always something drying on it ... It was a crowded but happy room. Mum being on her own was a dab hand at interior decorating. She had become self-reliant in her daily struggles to make ends meet. There was always lots of washing hanging ... [after church] we would return to Academy Road for Sunday dinner. Granny would prepare all the food the day before as she was loath to do anything on the 'Lord's Day'. I still have not known anyone to make a Scotch broth as good as Granny*.

In *History of a Drowning Boy*, this wistfulness has all but gone. Granny now takes her place alongside his mother as one of the 'shrill', 'domineering' women who helped make the small flat in Academy Road such a cold and uninviting place.

Lily Whyte – Granny – died in 1990. At this time, Nilsen had been in the habit of writing autobiographical notes in a diary. In *History of a Drowning Boy*, he expands some of these thoughts to explore his confused feelings towards his grandmother. He talks about 'the drab, grey life of dear departed Granny'. Then he wonders what kept her going until she was 96. His visual image is of a hard-bitten fish-wife who never stopped to think, in case thinking made her realise the tragedy of her life. He concludes that for all her good intentions, she suffered from emotional paralysis that knocked any gentleness out of her.

Betty, Olav, Dennis and Sylvia finally moved out of Granny's house in 1954. They travelled a mere couple of streets away to a flat above what is now a florist's shop in 73 Mid Street. The move marked the end of a period when Nilsen claims he would spend lonely afternoons wandering the mile-and-a-half down to the beach to be alone with nature. Common sense, however, suggests that such stories were exaggerated.

Whether or not Nilsen was really allowed to wander all around town as a young boy, life certainly changed when a local builder called Adam Scott started to court Nilsen's mother. His presence brought increased structure to the household. Betty Scott would later say it made another depressing council house feel like home. They were married six months later. Life with three children had readjusted Betty Nilsen's priorities for a partner. Reliability was now prioritised over glamour. Adam Scott was thick-set and of average height with receding hair. He worked as handyman for the council and if he didn't have much money to bring in, at least he was honest and determined to treat his stepchildren as if they were his own.

Nilsen's book swiftly deals with his mother's remarriage. He doesn't want to attach much psychological significance to the upheaval it caused. Still, he does admit to being upset by the lack of affection he received, and that was a reason to resent Adam Scott. In particular, he talks about disgust at hearing his mother and Scott making love, which they did with 'rapt abandon' producing four babies 'practically one after the other'. Soon,

however, Nilsen says he stopped blaming Scott. He decided that if his mother didn't show him love, then that was entirely her fault. And once he realised this, he says in *History of a Drowning Boy*, he started to pity Adam Scott in the face of his mother's domineering character:

> *My stepfather was a semi-literate, shy, County Council labourer who was completely dominated by my mother. He had a quiet personality and violence and malice were completely against his nature. She wore the pants in the house. She would often goad him into 'doing his duty' (as the man in the house) with oblique taunts questioning his potency in being reluctant to beat we kids for misdemeanours.*

Nilsen omits any mention of his mother's claim that now he went from withdrawn to disobedient. And that wasn't just at home – he also received cuffs around the ear from the local constable. Instead, Nilsen just tells us how cold his house-proud mother was. And, during this period, it seems Betty Scott did fail to show Dennis proper maternal love. She herself admitted so, saying that during 1954 she found it almost impossible to hug him. No amount of self-admonishment seemed to change this. There was just something about his difficult, unresponsive nature that prevented her from wanting to touch him.

When things became uncomfortable at home, in his piece called 'The Psychograph', Nilsen says he liked to imagine himself as a 'Saturday matinée hero'. Although having his head in the clouds was typical, the accompanying details are, again, less convincing. He says, for the 'first and last time' in his life, he joined a childhood gang who took part in the 'full range of schoolboy antics and adventures'. His friends, we hear, were 'inquisitive, daring, and mischievous'. He would have us believe that they sailed boats, built rafts and scaled rocks. But the water in which this was supposed to have happened was the very water of which even hardened fishermen were wary. Eventually, however, Nilsen says he tired of these children and their 'dull aspirations'.

Now, Nilsen says, he started to look increasingly to his imagination and animals for company. There were two boys he did still get on with – Farquar Mackenzie and Malcolm Rennie. Together, they would go to abandoned air-raid shelters to find fledglings. The three of them would

make nests for them in fish boxes and shoe boxes. Nilsen's favourites were called Tufty and Jocky. One day, when the boys went to play at the shelter, they discovered some local tearaways had killed the pigeons. With a display of emotion absent from later life, Nilsen says he sobbed his eyes out. A similar occurrence happened when his rabbit died of cold in its hutch some months later. The animal's pen had been outside in the back yard.

In *History of a Drowning Boy*, Nilsen complains bitterly that the reason such things happened was because his mother wouldn't allow animals inside the house. In interviews, she would say it wasn't practical to keep them. But Dennis was always convinced the real reason was because she didn't share his love of nature.

Nilsen's relationship with animals recurs throughout his writing. He calls himself a 'critter person' and said to Matthew Malekos: 'I like them, and they like me.' Even as he wrote those lines, he was being kept company by budgies in his cell. But the dynamic between Nilsen and animals is more complicated than simple affection on his part. From his manuscript, we now learn that that, when younger, there were occasions when he wanted to be cruel to animals.

The act of deriving sexual pleasure from hurting creatures – known as 'zoosadism' – has been observed in a number of serial killers. It's often seen as a precursor to violent sex attacks. Nilsen's new confessions about these moments of cruelty, however, don't sound as though he's trying to copy something he's read. He writes with the same detached confusion as with his murders, as if he simply can't explain his actions. What his behaviour shows, though, is that as early as the age of nine, Nilsen's ability to empathise with any other creature was badly malfunctioning.

In *History of a Drowning Boy*, he says: 'In 1955, I did something which thoroughly ashamed [sic] me, then as now. I slipped a wire around a friendly cat's neck [in a disused toilet]. I pulled up the cat by the wire attached to the cistern pipe. It struggled briefly under the wire. After it was dead, I prodded it and turned away disgusted by my own cruel behaviour. I wanted to see the reality and process of killing and death. I was not excited by the act.'

Shortly after the cat incident, Nilsen finally escaped the harsh atmosphere of Fraserburgh. The family moved into a larger council flat in the village of Strichen, a small village about eight miles inland from

Fraserburgh. There is a short main street with a few streets running parallel to it. The focal points are a couple of pubs and a village store and, like Fraserbugh, most of the buildings are in the granite style.

The family's new address was 16 Baird Road, and it was where Nilsen spent what many would assume to be the most formative years of his childhood. Nestling at the foot of Mormond Hill, Baird Road is one of Strichen's nicest streets. Its houses stand out by being faced with red stone and are generously sized. Although Nilsen never says so, one imagines it would have been a comfortable place to grow up. And, most importantly, although the village was dull, it was not hard like Fraserburgh.

Nilsen, however, gives the impression of disliking both the village and his school. The teachers weren't much better than those 'schoolmarm spinsters' in Fraserburgh who would bully him with mental arithmetic or make him feel like a 'scruffy urchin'. He resented the way his mother spoke to them. Nilsen claims she would kowtow to any figure in authority. Others simply remember Betty Scott just conscientiously trying to make everyone understand their financial circumstances. One teacher, Melita Lee, said that when there was a school trip to Belmont Camp in Perthshire, Nilsen's mother offered all she could afford – 10 shillings – and even though it fell short, the school accepted it.

Melita Lee was one of the locals who remembered Nilsen best at the time of the arrest. She considered him hard-working, able, very good at art, but with no interest in sport of any kind. Academically, she thought he was probably B stream. Nilsen's mother thought he was mainly in the C class – the lowest. Still, she was proud of his artistic talents, especially the day he managed to get higher marks than Bruce Rankin, who went on to teach art in a local school.

Other than art, Nilsen enjoyed English and history the best. But, looking back on his schooldays, he talks more about receiving six strokes on the palm of the hand than about those who introduced him to ideas. Judging by the testimony of others the punishments he talks about probably reflect feelings more than actual events. And these feelings were increasingly hidden. While the schoolteachers thought him simply solitary and introverted, the young boy thought he was alien. 'Nature', he would tell Brian Masters, had 'mismatched' him from 'the flock'.

Nilsen's memoirs now show that, within a year, he was processing reality in an abnormal and dangerous fashion. Increasingly, he talks in terms of experiencing life as an internal 'film', a term he uses for his constant fantasising. This was considerably more than a bad case of Walter Mitty-style daydreaming; it was a pathological way of interpreting reality. Maybe it would have been more benign if the ingredients to hand had been different. But Nilsen believes he was still dogged by his memories of Fraserburgh – the unhappy home life, the raging North Sea and a series of stories of fishermen dying by drowning that the adults would tell.

During these early years in Strichen, these memories combined to produce a fixation with death and water. As puberty approached, such thoughts became increasingly confused with sex. Or, at least, as an adult, looking back on his childhood, Nilsen was unable to distinguish between his erotic imagination and things that had happened during walks on the beach.

A psychiatric report, written before the trial, discusses a story that, at the time, he claimed was literally true. Nilsen had said that when he was about 11 or 12 while visiting Fraserburgh Bay, he decided to walk into the North Sea – fully clothed. As he was wading, knee-deep, he lost his footing and started to drown. The next thing he remembered was being in the sand dunes by the beach. His clothes had been removed and lay in a neatly folded pile next to him. On his stomach was some sticky fluid. He thinks he saw a 16-year-old boy staring at him. Nilsen concluded that the boy had fished him out of the water and then masturbated on his torso.

The psychiatrist, James Mackeith, who quoted the story, considered it bizarre. Nilsen now concedes in *History of a Drowning Boy* that what he had said was fantasy. But when trying to recall the actual events behind it, the results again sound just like his sex dreams: 'On the crowded holiday beach one day in summer I saw the lifeguards rescue a young man swimmer. I was fascinated to see this seemingly strong young man being carried from the sea, limp and almost naked, and given artificial respiration. My eyes opened in wonder as he later 'came alive'. My fascination increased as my eyes travelled over his nakedness and became fixed on the bulge under his swimming briefs.'

The other drowning stories in the manuscript, the non-sexual ones, are more likely to be literally true. One involves Mr Ironside, a senile old man,

who had gone wandering off. A group of volunteers searched for him all day long. As the summer evening drew on, Dennis joined in. He says he saw a ‘bundle’ down by the river, and pointed it out. The rescue Land Rover was summoned with its ropes and ladders. Nilsen describes seeing them haul up the body of the old man dressed in a cap, pyjamas and Wellington boots. It reminded him of what had happened to his grandfather.

The final ‘water’ story involved a friend of his brother’s called Billy Skinner. This one, however, also demonstrates a disturbing hostility that Nilsen was quietly harbouring towards some of his contemporaries. Nilsen seems to have been jealous of Skinner and the ‘insider’ types. Whereas he felt he was on life’s sidelines, Skinner was playing in the same ‘tough-kid’ gang as his brother Olav. On the day he drowned, Skinner had been showing off on the rocks near the lighthouse museum. He’d knocked his head and fallen into the water. Despite efforts to rescue him, he couldn’t be revived. ‘The sea doesn’t care how tough you think you are,’ Nilsen remarks. He then wonders what Skinner, in life, would have made of the indignity of an old nurse washing his dead, naked body.

Nilsen felt similar resentment towards his brother Olav, the ‘normal’ son who seemed to get all the attention. Nilsen’s older brother was gregarious and manly. He enjoyed football, billiards, snooker, cards, horse racing and, when old enough, chasing girls. Despite Dennis’s bitterness towards him, he was also fascinated by him. When he was 10 or 11, and his brother 13 or 14, Nilsen says he would grope his brother’s penis in their shared bed. To Dennis, this was part of natural development. He also feels sure Olav derived some pleasure from the experience. But shortly after, he remembers Olav calling him ‘hen’ in public, a local Buchan dialect term for woman. Others just thought it a funny name – he seemed to prefer being with the girls after all – but Dennis says he knew his brother was trying to humiliate him, and why.

As part of his further sexual experimentation, he thinks he might also have groped his sister, Sylvia, the sibling he liked the most. He thinks he touched her mainly because he was curious about developing bodies. But he also wonders if it was his fondness for Sylvia that caused him later to be attracted to boys who looked like her. That, in turn, prompts him to classify the incident as an example of his potential bisexuality.

The prose in *History of a Drowning Boy* becomes more urgent when he recalls the 'embryonic' sex games he remembers in the 'parks' – little more than small play areas – of Strichen. He calls these 'sightings'. They were occasions where boys would pin down girls and feel under their clothes. One summer afternoon in the park, the young Dennis saw his brother pin down a girl and put his hand up her skirt. Nilsen says he was upset to see that his brother was such a bully. But sometimes older boys would pin down younger boys, and Nilsen found this exciting. Once, he says, he was pinned down and fondled. He didn't find it unpleasant but he was annoyed that the boy was bigger and stronger. And in his autobiography, he cites other occasions when he did the same to another boy:

> *There was no violence as such, just wrestling him to the ground and putting my hand up his short pants to feel him. I only did this on two occasions and it seemed to be a passing phase. It was a need to feel a surge of power over another person. It was an embryonic sex act ... perhaps a rehearsal. On another occasion I had a wrestling match with a beautiful, almost delicate boy who lived next door.*
>
> *He was about a year younger than me and his build and features had a feminine quality about them. Like me, he was no 'football type'. I soon overpowered him and was astride him, pinning him down by his arms held down on the grass. I held him there looking down at his close, handsome face ... I held him there and we gazed into each other's faces. We did not speak ... only the language of our eye contact.*

Nilsen writes this passage as though he feels some romantic understanding existed between him and the boy. The reader, however, is again left wondering whether this was just Nilsen's imagination. Some of his fancies were even odder. For a while, he had a crush on a drawing of a boy who was on the cover of his French text book. He also remembers being attracted to two 'special' effeminate boys at school. Apparently, they made him feel like a girl who would faint if they spoke to him. Nilsen says he would watch others and imagine things he would like to do. He was aroused when he saw another boy masturbate for the first time behind some sheds near the park.

Although the knowledge that he was attracted to boys made Nilsen feel ashamed, he was proud of the creativity he thinks is tied up with his sexuality. One evening in particular sticks in Nilsen's memory. It exemplified the gap between his burgeoning identity as a 'creative homosexual' and the lack of imagination around him. He describes the family sitting down to watch television. Around him, he saw 'kitschness' in the decorations, low aspirations in the literature and repression in the religion. On the small black-and-white TV a modern ballet was being shown. When he saw the male dancers in their tights, Nilsen said he was excited. The feeling was cultural as well as sexual. His mother just shouted, 'Get this filth off!' Hostility welled up in him. Why couldn't she understand his world?

Nilsen cites the low cultural ambitions of 16 Baird Road as another example of how he felt his differences were rejected. He thinks it was damaging for him not to have had any of his talents and sensibilities nurtured. Later, he and Matthew Malekos discussed whether such low cultural aspirations in the house may have denied him 'the building blocks of human need'. In his thesis, Malekos conjectures whether Nilsen's claims of emotional impoverishment match existing theories of how psychopaths are created. He finds some evidence to suggest that they are.

Whether or not the atmosphere in 16 Baird Road really damaged Nilsen psychologically, he certainly resented it. It encouraged him to retreat further into his private world of the imagination. He says that he liked to feed this with movies, and this seems to have made him try to format his fantasies to make them more like films he had seen. Strichen was much too small to have a movie theatre, however every so often a projector would be set up in the town hall. Nilsen would go as often as he could.

Retreating to the world of make-believe, he found he could replace the world-as-it-was with the world-he-wanted-it-to-be. Up on the silver screen, he saw father figures in actors like James Stewart and Gary Cooper. With James Stewart, Nilsen felt a sexual as well as parental attraction. 'Life looked better through the oblong frame of the movie screen,' he writes. When on his own, he imagined he was in a movie, which he considered a great improvement on 'the drab dullness of real life'. Only one person in his family seemed to understand the power of the imagination like he did, and that was his Uncle Robert.

Aunt Lily's husband, Robert Ritchie, was a design engineer by trade, but also a man of ideas and culture. His pride and joy was an expensive hi-fi system on which he would play Dennis the great symphonies. While the music was playing, he would regale the boy with tales of the left-wing struggle. These stories may have opened up the welcome possibility that Uncle Robert and his kind could be right and most of the world wrong. They may have been the primary reason that socialism later became so attractive to him.

Then, at the age of 14, despite the influence of Uncle Robert, Dennis did something that took everyone by surprise: he joined the Army Cadet Force. We hear that, despite being physically weak and disliking authority, he found firing guns and, more particularly, the other boys, thrilling. That last point is made at great length. Nilsen spends paragraph after paragraph detailing how thrilling he found seeing them in their PT kit.

But although much of what he says is merely sexual, Nilsen also seems to want readers of his book to join in his youthful enthusiasm for the Army. Nilsen knew that, as much as he would have liked to have been able to develop his artistic side, in the general area of the Broch there were limited prospects to do so. Given his realistic options, the idea of adventure and male camaraderie certainly seemed more interesting than joining Uncle Robert in the Consolidated Pneumatic Tool Company. Above all, Nilsen had had enough of Aberdeenshire. He knew that in the Army there were all sorts of roles he could try. His favourite idea was to try to be a cook. After a very brief spell in a fish canning factory, he went down to Aberdeen to the Army Recruiting Office and took the exams. He passed them with ease. He then signed up for a period of nine years.

One July morning in 1960, Adam Scott took Dennis Nilsen to the station to catch a steam train to London. The lad had high hopes of his new life. He would be able to see the world and have great adventures, far from the small-town attitudes of Strichen. He had, however, misjudged his ability to fit in with young, 'normal', heterosexual men. It would take a further 22 years and the lives of at least 12 young men before Nilsen could really start to accept his sexuality and background. Being frank with himself began with his nine months awaiting trial on remand.

3

PRISON LIFE – BRIXTON

I seek only to reach out to engage with the human dimension which is anathema to rigid officials of the retribution machine.'
DENNIS NILSEN, IN A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR

The nine months Nilsen spent on remand were filled with conflict and confrontation. His crimes and odd personality caused him to be shunned by fellow inmates. Worse were the constant arguments he got into with warders. On occasion, these led to his being detained in solitary confinement. But by the end of his time on remand, Nilsen had begun to stabilise. He was helped both by the lack of destructive stimuli – sex and alcohol – and by the fact that, for the first time in years, he was no longer isolated.

Not only were there people surrounding him, but there were also others interested in him. Nilsen no longer felt invisible and it encouraged him to record his thoughts. Once he had started to write, a pen rarely left his hand. Every scrap of paper in his cell became covered in his dense, spidery handwriting. He was on a search for anything in his past – such as the death of his grandfather – that might provide him with a reason why he had become a killer.

In *History of a Drowning Boy*, however, rather than recall his intense introspection, Nilsen chooses to concentrate on what he considered to be the awful regime of Brixton Prison and the injustices he felt were heaped upon him. The chapter he writes about the period before the trial is fascinating, frustrating and frequently unpleasant. Nothing in what he says is straightforward. Nilsen constantly seeks to cast himself in a better light by putting others down. Petty grumbles are given as much space as his reflections on how he had become 'addicted to murder'.

Nilsen's description of the day of his arrest is a case in point. Immediately after the arrest, the police had driven Nilsen over to Hornsey, a

smallish police station two miles east of where he had himself been a probationary police officer. Nilsen says that Peter Jay, Geoff Chambers, Steve McCusker and Jeff Butler didn't know what to expect from him. Jay, for his part, says Nilsen seemed 'extremely odd' and he knew he would need to be played carefully.

In particular, Jay suspected that, as a union man, Nilsen would be noticing whether the regulations were being followed. He was right. It shows in Nilsen's description of Chambers as 'having forgotten a lot of the basic principles of police evidence gathering despite his exalted rank,' and his statement that he was pleased his treatment was 'correct and amiable.' Indeed Jay's friendly, light-hearted and efficient manner created an environment in which Nilsen felt comfortable enough to talk freely.

When Nilsen set about unburdening himself, his manner seemed relaxed and his words informative. Internally, however, Nilsen says he felt very differently. He says that 'playing the part of a villain was new to me' and being 'absolutely isolated and friendless I entered into a spirit of bonhomie with my captors'. His conscience, he adds, was 'in desperate need for relief'.

Jay remembers Nilsen as being quietly spoken but with a strange swagger. During the interviews, he drank endless cups of coffee, chain-smoked cigarettes and his words were peppered with his black humour. It resulted in many infamous remarks, such as: 'I don't know how many bodies I had under the floorboards at any one time. I didn't do a stock check.'

Nilsen's book makes no apology, however, for his black humour. He does claim, though, that that he talked more freely than he felt he should have. 'Previous commentators,' he says, 'have grossly underplayed this … element of fear.' Despite being photographed daily to minimise any threat of being beaten, Nilsen says he was worried 'the police might hang [him] up in a cell and call it suicide'. But given his first-hand knowledge of police practice this is hardly convincing. Similarly, when he says that, on his second day in custody, he turned away a solicitor because he didn't want to be told to remain silent, it as if he really wanted to appear in as good a light as possible to *himself*.

Soon, the detectives started to worry that, despite such behaviour, their prisoner might stop co-operating. Jay effectively led the investigation. He is

6ft 3in with a tough ‘old school’ manner. His boss, DCS Geoff Chambers, was nicknamed ‘Fag Ash and Confusion’. Jay told me how aware they were of the time pressure they were working under. Without an extension they only had 48 hours to charge Nilsen and, even though he was talking constantly, there was still the task of corroborating what he said.

With the body of Stephen Sinclair reassembled on the mortuary slab, they decided to concentrate on his murder. Once Nilsen was detained on one charge, they would be able to question him about others at their leisure. But before this, Chambers and Jay had the press to deal with. The newspapers had first learnt about the goings on in Cranley Gardens after Mike Cattran had contacted a local reporter from Muswell Hill who then tipped off Fleet Street. Because of this, Jay and Chambers had to quickly call a press conference. The reporters were all looking for a quote for their front page. ‘How long,’ one journalist asked, ‘has Nilsen had this unusual habit?’

Chambers and Jay were conscious that if the papers reported too much it might hinder their investigation. They needed to act quickly. So at 5.00pm on Friday, 11 February 1983, Dennis Andrew Nilsen was charged with the murder of Stephen Sinclair. The case was now placed *sub judice,* with reporting forbidden until the trial.

Meanwhile, Nilsen was now starting to prove a difficult client for his solicitor, a cheerful man called Ronald Moss. At his first court hearing at Highbury Magistrates’ Court on the Saturday, 12 February, Nilsen forewent the customary blanket over the head and walked out in the full glare of the press. Images of him in his large spectacles and neat side-parted hair made the front pages of the tabloids, pictures which are still often shown today.

Nilsen’s behaviour may or may not have been a case of him trying to stage-manage his image. It was also down to the fact that once he got it into his head to do something a certain way, that was how it had to be. After unburdening himself of his crimes, he wanted to believe he had rejoined the world of decent, morally upstanding people. He says in his book that that morning he didn’t want to hide away like a common criminal. In a letter to me some years later, he wrote: ‘On my arrest, I regained the moral high ground. My commitment was clear. To assist in every possible way to bring lawful justice to the past, present and future … I am still firmly wedded to

the moral code with the added degree of maturity which comes from the enlightenment of experience.'

On 18 February 1983, with most of the interrogation now concluded, Nilsen was taken to Brixton Prison. He was held on remand there from February until his trial in October. Going to Brixton was more than just a journey a few miles south. Hornsey had looked like the police station he had himself worked in, and Chambers and Jay gave him endless snacks and cigarettes. Brixton felt like what it was – prison.

It also epitomised everything bad about the Prison Service in the 1980s. The corridors stank of unpleasant food and male bodies; noise clattered around the bare walls and in winter it was constantly freezing. The physical discomfort was only part of it. The reality of what Nilsen had done was also starting to sink in. If killing was an addiction, here was the cold turkey.

Nilsen knew his eventual prospects were bleak. The best case scenario lay in a sentence mitigated by 'diminished responsibility'. This could lead to a reduced sentence or, just as likely, being sent to an asylum until considered 'cured'. That possibility terrified Nilsen. One psychiatrist who visited, reported: 'He is preoccupied with avoiding a mad label.'

Nilsen wasn't just afraid, he was also angry. He was particularly furious about the idea that men who hadn't yet gone to court were still treated like criminals. He says he no longer felt dangerous and wanted bail arrangement where he could be 'held in prison custody away from the crude violence of the Brixton Prison Authorities'. Later, he also says he was surprised that DCS Chambers should imply 'that if [he] were to be released from custody [he] would go around killing people and cutting them up'. Despite his open confessions, Nilsen deemed himself to now be 'harmless'. Why couldn't other people see it, he thought?

After returning from his bail hearing – it had been swiftly refused – Nilsen was taken off to a private room to talk to Paul Bowden, a senior Home Office psychiatrist. It was meant to be a pre-trial evaluation about his competence to stand trial. Bowden was sure Nilsen was not schizophrenic nor otherwise incompetent. But after an hour together, Bowden began to feel there was something about his excitability that was concerning. He recommended an eye be kept on him for his own safety. Nilsen was thus sent to the hospital wing and stayed there, as a potential suicide risk, month after month, throughout his period of remand.

Being kept in the hospital wing – what Nilsen considered to be 'solitary confinement' – angered him even more than before. Rather than being more relaxed, as one might expect, the authorities exercised additional powers over inmates in the medical unit. These included patient isolation for up to 23½ hours in a solitary cell. Nilsen alleges he was held like this for most of the time.

Although he didn't have many friends, in his first couple of weeks in Brixton, Nilsen says he did still receive a couple of visitors. One was Cathy Hughes, who had taken over as Denmark Street Branch Secretary at the CSPA Union. His boss Janet Leaman also wrote but didn't visit. In her letter she said she wouldn't believe the accusations until they were proved. Her words were warm and reminded Nilsen how his cynical humour had 'always hit the spot'. But between such, short-lived, signs of support, and Brian Masters getting in touch, Nilsen mainly relied on stilted conversations conducted between cells for companionship.

Some descriptions of those he met at this time are given in *History of a Drowning Boy* to highlight what a terrible place Brixton was. If they are to be believed then, for once, Nilsen might have had a point. Two cells down the corridor was an inmate called David – not his real name. His was a particularly sad case. He'd had been charged with the murder of his baby daughter. He claimed that the murder had been committed under the influence of drugs and he had no memory of it. Nilsen says he thought that David needed immediate treatment for his drug problems.

After telling the reader how awful this situation was, he gives a flavour of how he would interact with David. He remembers one afternoon in particular. It was just after the prison library trolley had done its rounds. Nilsen asked David if he could swap his book of poems for David's copy of the *Complete Works of Shakespeare*. They started to discuss David's case. Soon, the conversation turned to the unfairness of wearing prison uniform. How can they make you dress as a prisoner, they agreed, when you haven't yet been convicted of anything?

From the injustices of prison life, Nilsen moves on to the plight of some of the more wretched prisoners he saw. For the most part, he says inmates were just 'ordinary human beings' in adverse circumstances. Nilsen says that 'in crimes of emotional/sexual psychology, it is a case of "there but by the grace of God goes anyone"'. But what to do with such prisoners? Nilsen

says he thought prisons were there to help rehabilitate, not to further brutalise those to whom life had already been cruel. He concluded the prison authorities didn't really want to manage their inmates back into society, but 'warehouse' them like 'animals in a zoo'.

If he doubted for a moment that prison warders were thugs, then meeting another inmate – we'll call him Carlton – settled the issue. Here was another very tragic situation. Carlton was standing accused of throwing a child out of a window during a burglary. The child had died as a result. Nilsen and Carlton spoke to each other during cell-to-cell conversations and exercise periods. It soon struck Nilsen that Carlton had mental problems. In fact, he thought he had no place being there at all. On top of that, he seemed to be the victim of racial abuse. Carlton was a heavily-built black man, who, Nilsen claims, was repeatedly beaten by the prison guards.

On one occasion, it was apparently just because he was listening to Bob Marley. Nilsen vividly describes the guards' language: 'Don't you play that fucking jungle music in here, you black cunt.' When the prison doctor came to do his rounds on the medical wing, he allegedly ignored Carlton's injuries. Carlton was eventually committed to Broadmoor. Before he left, he thanked Nilsen for not blanking him. It was written on a Mother's Day card and Nilsen included it in the papers he gave Masters.

Nilsen enjoyed acting protectively – and, probably, domineeringly – towards weaker inmates like Carlton. Some were very grateful for his support and assistance. Peter Jay told me that, when he and Geoff Chambers travelled over to complete their final interviews, they were surprised to see other prisoners come up behind Nilsen and slap him on the back. It appears that, in particular, Nilsen helped others write letters to their girlfriends or lawyers.

Mostly, however, Nilsen was a nuisance to all around him. The governor, A J Pearson, told him one day that after all he had done, he had a cheek going on about prisoners' rights. But Nilsen could only see the hypocrisy on the other side. To him, the authorities were punishing people by breaking the law themselves. His chapter on his spell on remand is replete with accusations of beatings, the forced administration of drugs such as chloropromazine (an anti-psychotic), and placing prisoners naked in what he referred to as 'strip cells' in the 'punishment block'.

As a prisoner on remand, Nilsen was given an allowance of 88p a week. He was allowed to supplement this with his own money, but since he had resigned from the Civil Service (to spare them any embarrassment, apparently), he had no salary. Nilsen's main outgoing was tobacco. As a lifelong chain-smoker, he'd been so concerned about running out in prison; the day he arrived he'd switched to roll-ups. Cigarettes and writing materials were Nilsen's necessities. When he could access money, it would be spent on newspapers and batteries for his small radio.

Dennis Nilsen may have had some friends among weaker prisoners, but a significant number objected to his very presence there; some because of what he had allegedly done, but others just disliked his aloof personality. One of Nilsen's lowest moments in the pre-trial period came when the prison governor banned him from attending chapel. Despite his atheist beliefs, Nilsen had been a regular visitor to break up the interminable hours spent locked up in his prison hospital cell.

The governor was worried that Nilsen's presence might cause a disturbance and present a threat to 'good order and discipline'. That wasn't how Dennis Nilsen saw it. In *History of a Drowning Boy*, he describes this incident as his 'expulsion' from 'religious activity'. He felt the chaplains should have stood up to the governor and describes them as 'Christian hypocrites', and 'worse than cockroaches'. They were forever 'crossing to the other side of the road', like in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The reader is left feeling that what really got to Nilsen was that the Church was meant to be there for all humanity. If it rejected him, what, then, was he?

If the world saw him as a monster, Nilsen's 'inner film' was still working out ways to be the hero of his story. He found it, temporarily, when he fell in love. In between writing his self-admonishing essays, Nilsen had become infatuated with a young psychopath, who was also on remand, called David Martin. They met for short periods in the exercise yard. He was small, effeminate and bisexual. It is possible their relationship may have developed if circumstances had been different. But, as it stood, it was largely one-sided. While Martin seemed initially to enjoy Nilsen's attention, he was also smitten with an ex-model called Sue Stephens. Eventually, Martin sent a note to Nilsen to stop pestering him. Still, the 'couple' was gossiped about in the prison. One warder described them as the 'copper

who liked killing queers with the queer who liked killing coppers', referring to Nilsen having been a policeman and Martin having shot one of them.

It was easy to see why Nilsen might have been attracted to David Martin. His story read like the plot of a gangster movie. He was a career criminal who had been in and out of prison all his life. Martin had resumed offending in 1981 after an eight-year sentence for fraud. His spree started with a series of burglaries on video stores to get equipment to start an adult movie business. A month later, he raided a gun store in Covent Garden. Finally, in August 1982, he broke into a film-processing laboratory, shooting a policeman in the leg before escaping.

Martin then fled to Spain. While he was away, detectives located his flat. Just as he returned, the flat was being put under surveillance. The only person they saw going in and out, however, was a slim, blonde girl. Then information reached them that Martin himself enjoyed dressing up in women's clothes – they had been watching him all along.

On 15 September, Special Branch waited outside the flat for the 'blonde with the Adam's apple' to return. As armed officers approached him, Martin pulled a gun out of the top of his stockings and pointed it at them. They responded by shooting him in his neck.

Some months later, after he had recovered, Martin escaped from Marylebone Magistrates' Court, using clips and pins hidden in his long hair to pick the lock. With his fur-coat collar up and a stack of papers in his arms, he then walked out of the building. News of the escape spread over the front pages, and a manhunt was launched.

When Nilsen chatted to Martin in the exercise yard, he discovered just how close he'd been to Martin's subsequent, dramatic arrest. That their stories might be connected appealed to Nilsen's sense of romance. In a ten-page sequence, his manuscript describes the last week of January in 1983.

Nilsen had killed Stephen Sinclair on Wednesday, 26 January 1983. The next morning, he says he woke with a hangover, but still felt ok to do a normal day's work. When he got back, he spent some time admiring Sinclair's naked body and then he decided to go for an evening's drinking at the fashionable, gay-friendly, King William IV pub in Hampstead.

Half an hour before Nilsen had arrived at the 'King Willy', Martin had been arrested in Hampstead Tube station. One of the regulars at the bar was talking about how the police had shut the Tube station down. But Nilsen

says at the time he was more interested in where he might find some action. He decided to move to the Sir Richard Steele pub near Belsize Park Tube just down the road. The police were there, too. Nilsen asked what was going on; the constable replied they had arrested a dangerous criminal.

Later, Nilsen got a cab back. He describes getting home and letting the dog out into the garden downstairs. Then he went up to his room, lifted Sinclair's dead body up and placed him in the chair in the next room. Filling his glass, and turning on the tape player, he turned to the dead man. Without any apparent shame or embarrassment, Nilsen recalls saying to him, 'You're a lot better off than the poor bastard they've got down the Tube station.'

Although Dennis Nilsen and David Martin served remand time together in the summer of 1983, they became separated that autumn when Martin was moved from Brixton to Parkhurst. Suddenly, Nilsen felt isolated. Impulsively, he wrote to Martin's solicitor, Ralph Haeems, to see if he might represent them both. Any contact, he decided, was better than none.

Retaining Haeems as solicitor was not simply a romantic gesture by Nilsen – it was also a shrewd choice. Haeems had no qualms about representing notorious clients, frequently with favourable results. He was himself a colourful, unconventional character. Although brought up in Bombay, Haeems later relocated to London's East End, and he was Jewish. During his career he acted for the Krays, defended clients in the Brink's-Mat robbery and helped acquit a convicted paedophile, Russell Bishop, of the 'Babes in the Wood' killings. If ever there was a man to find a way to mitigate what Nilsen had already admitted to, it was surely Ralph Haeems.

By the time he appointed his new legal adviser, Nilsen had dismissed and re-appointed the previous solicitor, Ronald Moss, three times. In between these periods of appointment, he even tried to represent himself. Nilsen's dismissals of Moss always sprang from the same complaint – he felt that his lawyer simply wouldn't help him stand up to a prison regime, which he felt repressed and bullied him. He wanted Moss to give him legal help to put an end to what he saw as the intolerable conditions of the hospital wing, and the 'solitary confinement' that inevitably resulted from his own efforts to square up to the strictures of life inside.

Above all, Nilsen objected to the ‘monster’ tag that everybody seemed to apply to him. Did no one appreciate the psychological complexities of a case like his, he would ask himself. One afternoon, he became so frustrated, he started tearing up his case papers. The act of tearing up the papers landed Nilsen another spell in an isolation unit for behaving ‘irrationally’ or, as the doctors on the unit might have considered, to safeguard his own safety.

After appointing Haeems, things initially went well. Nilsen eventually, however, became disenchanted. By the end of their relationship, he would describe Haeems as the sort of man who had a ‘tax-deductible heart’. Some months earlier, he became convinced Haeems briefed friends in Fleet Street about current cases. This was doubly intolerable. Nilsen felt that if his solicitor kept such company, the least he could do was lean on them to tell the world how badly Dennis Nilsen was being treated. He felt he was doing a better job of that himself.

There had been two incidents over the summer of 1983 when Nilsen got a story in the papers, and he considered both a success. In May, Nilsen wrote to the *Guardian* newspaper, complaining that he had been misrepresented when Alan Rusbridger’s column had claimed he’d been a member of the Social Democratic Party. Nilsen pointed out that he was a socialist rather than a liberal, and that he’d never joined any party in his life. In fact, when asked to tick a box on his union forms, it had always been ‘independent radical’.

And then there was the ‘Chamberpot Incident’. At the end of the summer, Nilsen decided to show those around him that he would not stand for the inhuman conditions under which he was being kept. It had all started when Nilsen’s objections to the conditions of remand had resurfaced. He had threatened to protest against the way he, a man who had not yet stood trial, had to wear the clothes of a prisoner, by walking around naked. The response from the warders had been to tell Nilsen to remain in his cell. This, in turn, then had prevented him from being able to ‘slop out’. The faeces and urine built up in his pot to the point where the pot was overflowing with effluent. Determined to win the stand-off, on the evening of 1 August, Nilsen shouted ‘stand clear’ and threw the contents through the bars and out of the cell on to the landing. Several guards were hit and they retaliated robustly. In the ensuing scuffle, Nilsen lost a tooth, picked up a black eye, and earned himself 56 days in solitary confinement.

During Nilsen's nine months on remand, his only regular visitor was author Brian Masters. The resulting study, *Killing for Company,* would go on to win the 1985 Gold Dagger crime writing award. Such a close relationship between author and criminal reminded some critics of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, his celebrated study on the perpetrators of the Clutter family murders in Kansas. Masters' observational dynamic was, indeed, so unusual, it later became the subject of a BBC documentary, *Monochrome Man.*

Brian Masters grew up in a prefabricated house on London's Old Kent Road, where his sickly, hunchbacked mother and ineffectual father had been housed after the war. Prospects for children like him, he says in his autobiography *Getting Personal* were limited. However, he was determined to better himself. One episode at school changed the course of his life. Looking to win a prize for best school project, Masters wrote to the acerbic TV personality Gilbert Harding, asking to interview him. Harding agreed to the request and afterwards invited his young interviewer to tea. Later, he made it his business to educate the ambitious lad. Masters is very clear that his motives were entirely genuine.

Harding's mentoring helped Masters earn a place at Cardiff University, where he ended up with first-class honours in French Literature. He built on this by writing studies on Sartre and Camus. In his thirties, he moved on to biographies about British royalty. One on Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, was particularly well received.

In his early forties, Masters was interested in understanding the extreme possibilities of human behaviour. He read about the Nilsen case over breakfast one morning in his west London home. As he got to the end of the third page of revelations about the murders, he read a line about Nilsen enjoying reading Shakespeare. He wondered if this might be the opportunity he was looking for to study someone at the farthest end of the human spectrum. Towards the end of March, and ignorant of the protocol about writing to prisoners, Masters wrote a letter addressed to Nilsen c/o Brixton Prison. In it, he asked if he might want to co-operate with a book project. He also included a copy one of his previous biographies.

Although he knew he'd given the introduction his best shot, the author was only half expecting a reply. What he received on 30 March was truly

chilling. The first line read, ‘Dear Mr Masters, I pass the burden of my past actions on to your shoulders.’

Authors in England are not, in fact, allowed to contact prisoners on remand unless express permission is given. Masters’ initial letter had slipped past the prison censor. When the correct procedure had been explained, Masters then contacted Nilsen’s solicitor at the time, Ronnie Moss, a cheerful man whom he describes as looking more like a publican than a solicitor. Moss helped him make the correct application to the authorities concerning the writing project.

Meanwhile, he was given a one-off visiting order to meet Nilsen as a friend. On 20 April, they met in Brixton’s noisy visitors’ room. From what he had read, Masters was expecting a nervy, introspective man only comfortable expressing himself on paper. He was surprised to find in Dennis Nilsen a tall, imposing figure, ‘bristling with confidence’.

Shortly after the meeting, the Home Office gave Masters the green light to carry on with his visits. This worried DCI Jay and DCS Chambers. Their investigation was still ongoing and they were concerned Masters’ influence might affect Nilsen’s attitude and co-operation. They also doubted Masters had the stomach for what he was about to undertake.

He was therefore summoned to the station where they showed photographs of what they had found in the flat. The portfolio included gruesome pictures of Sinclair. In his own memoirs, Masters describes ‘the lips boiled away, the eyes soft and gluey, and the hair drifting to one side’, as examples of the sort of images he would never be able to forget. But these pictures also confirmed to him that here was a unique opportunity to explore the reality of evil.

Masters was not used to handling criminals. His recent subjects had been members of the aristocracy. But, whether by design or default, his approach turned out to be the key to open Nilsen. Masters just went ahead as normal and the prisoner responded with lengthy answers.

Nilsen would later tell me that the reason he had been so candid was because Masters was ‘all there was’, implying that if he had had any alternative outlet, he might have taken it instead. In truth, Masters was both a skilful interviewer and a sincere man. Nilsen also appears to have hoped that his sensitivity would also enable him to understand one crucial aspect to his character: his sexuality.

Increasingly, Nilsen let his guard down. It wasn't just the crimes he spoke about. He issued a stream of thoughts on his entire existence. One letter to Masters listed all the roles he had played in his life: schoolboy, soldier, chef, projectionist, policeman, clerical officer, executive officer, drunk, sexualist (male and female), murderer, animal lover, independent trades union officer, debater, champion of social causes, do-gooder, dissector of murder victims, grand vizier, and probably 'lifer'. He went on to speculate that if there were a God, what a strange set of 'priorities' he must have had for him.

The more Nilsen opened up, the more friends and even the Crown's trial psychiatrist, Paul Bowden, warned Masters that Nilsen might be manipulating him. Bookish and dapper, Brian Masters didn't look much like a match for someone like Dennis Nilsen. Masters, however, felt equal to all of Nilsen's games. He was, though, very aware he would need to play detective to find out the truth.

It wasn't just a case of judging what to believe but also finding the words to describe the drama of a man struggling to process a spree of 15 murders. His thoughts are given in a chapter called 'Remand'. Here, Nilsen's moods are described as a 'kaleidoscope … shifting from elation to gloom, from resignation to despair, from regret about the past to hope for the future'.

During the remaining months before the trial, Masters visited twice a week. Throughout this period, Nilsen wrote his thoughts and biographical reminiscences daily in prison exercise books (he would also carry on writing after the trial). Under the agreement Masters had with the prison and Home Office, he was allowed to use anything Nilsen had written but nothing from the face-to-face meetings. He even had to sign a formal undertaking to that effect.

Soon, Brian Masters started to experience what appeared to be Nilsen's fierce loyalty. At first, it seemed like one of his impulsive friendships. Eventually, however, he decided it was mainly an obsession with principles. During the summer, some prisoners suggested to Nilsen that Masters was a 'plant' for one of the tabloid newspapers. It made him extremely angry. He felt Masters was now his friend and an attack on the author was an attack on him. As the rumours grew, he responded by sulking and refusing to talk to his solicitor. This protest seemed childish.

Nilsen seemed confused by his own emotions. In one notebook, he described them as ‘the most toxic substances known to man’. His words match, remarkably, a profile of ‘covert schizoid personality’ described by the psychiatrist Dr Salman Akhtar. Such people are characterised as being, amongst other things: cynical, grandiose, sensitive, creative, voyeuristic, amoral, autistic, hungry for love and envious of others’ spontaneity. Nilsen wrote it must be a ‘wonderful gift’ to ‘throw your arms around someone and just weep’. At that moment, he seemed to accept that, for much of his life, normal emotions had been beyond him.

More usually Nilsen presented the impression that he was convinced he had now returned to ‘normal’. Of course, it was odd that he felt so little sadness for his victims, but he didn’t feel there was essentially anything wrong with him. Yet whenever he put pen to paper, the results inevitably showed him to be disconnected from his crimes. Most strikingly, there were a series of drawings of his last victim, Sinclair. These ‘Sad Sketches’ were accurately drawn renditions of how his remains appeared after they had been dismembered. They were accompanied by notes recounting how he had cut up the corpse. Masters described them as being drawn with ‘energy and pride’, and ‘an odd kind of perverse affection’.

As 24 October 1983 – the date set for the trial – drew closer, Nilsen’s mood swings seemed more extreme than ever. One moment he could be cheery and, minutes later, he seemed tortured. ‘I go through a personal hell each day,’ he says in *Killing for Company.*

The divisions within him in the run up to the trial were, however, still consistent with a personality that was under pressure but basically working. That impulsive infatuation with Martin, the sudden friendships in the exercise yard, the erratic defence strategy and the compulsive writing may simply have been him coming to terms with being a murderer. His behaviour even reminded Masters occasionally of Raskolnikov, Dostoyevsky’s motiveless killer whose reflections are the subject of the classic novel, *Crime and Punishment*.

Nilsen even said that he hoped if he accepted all blame, maybe he could look the parents of victim Ken Ockendon in the eye. Of all his victims, Ockendon was the most inexplicable. Nilsen had met the 23-year-old Canadian tourist in a pub one lunchtime. The young man had a loving

family and probably wasn't homosexual. The two of them had enjoyed an entire day together. Nilsen had seemed genuinely confused as to why he had killed him. In order to atone for what he had done, he told Masters he wanted to accept any punishment the law prescribed and some more besides.

Eventually, however, he seems to have changed his mind. Nilsen pleaded not guilty on the grounds of diminished responsibility. On 3 November, the 12 men and women of the jury were initially unable to agree whether there might be something sufficiently wrong with Nilsen's brain to mitigate his actions. The next day, however, a majority verdict was accepted, and Dennis Nilsen was a guilty and an evil man.

During the trial, which is the main focus of Chapter 10, Nilsen had tried to convince the outside world of the context of the crimes. Once that failed, he felt had only his own writing to fall back on. In his letter to me, he stated, 'I explain but *do not* excuse. We are not talking about studious "evil" but human inadequacy. Men will admit to potent criminality or controlling powerful "villainy" but never "inadequacy". My crimes flowed from personal inadequacy developed over a lengthy period. It was a desperate possessive "aggression", almost spiritually passive in the motive and heat of expression.'

The evening following his life sentencing – with a minimum of 25 years to serve –Dennis Nilsen was in the hospital wing of Wormwood Scrubs Prison, and appeared utterly despondent. One of the orderlies let him watch TV. Nilsen says in *History of a Drowning Boy* that he sat blankly in front of it, considering his position: 'The world that I looked at on the TV was not the world that I had known before… Everything had changed drastically and I now felt like a ghost looking at an alien world of flesh and blood people. With an endless sentence ahead of me, I felt that I had been expelled from society for ever more.'

4

OLD KIT BAG

'The Army gave me an education, a trade, and the key to travel to other worlds. The north-east of Scotland was no place for a young, gay man.'
DENNIS NILSEN, IN A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR

Nilsen's memoirs focus hard on his childhood and life in London for answers to his behaviour. But neither begin to explain how he could have set out one night in 1978 for the pub, and then woke up the next morning a murderer. Thousands have worse childhoods than Nilsen, and almost as many young men deal with alienation through casual pickups and excessive drinking. But, if Nilsen's raking over his first 30 years raises as many questions as answers, it does show *when* his mental abnormalities developed most uniquely. That was in the 11 years he spent in the Army. Nilsen's accounts of his inner life during this period make for chilling reading. Ironically, it was a time when he was never short of company, structure or normality.

In the Army, Nilsen travelled the world, learnt a trade and had responsibility. But he also became used to death, felt sexually ashamed and became accustomed to knocking his consciousness into submission through drink. Most disturbingly, he developed sexual fantasies that started with partners who were totally passive, then those who were unconscious, and finally involved the dead.

There was nothing particularly sinister in his make-up, however, when he alighted on Aldershot station platform in September 1961. He was not yet 16, quite tall, physically weak, enthusiastic and immature. As a boy soldier, Nilsen was posted to 'V' squad, along with 20 others of the same age. Aldershot was then a large garrison town on the Surrey–Hampshire border, surrounded by woodland and close to the stockbroker belt. Virtually the entire town was given over to the Army, and squaddies filled the local bars and canteens. This was still the pre-Beatles era and Elvis played on the

jukebox for the whole of that year. In the nearby genteel market towns of Farnham and Guildford, wealthy commuters tutted when they saw young soldiers visiting their towns but, back in Aldershot, Nilsen and his companions saw a role model on every street corner. And being in such a densely military environment encouraged the youngsters. Together, they learnt discipline and drill, and all the other things the Army does to turn young lads into men.

Nilsen, in particular, says he became friendly with three of the boys: Brian Bacher, Chris Innerd and Eric 'Tabs' Talbot. Some of Nilsen's happiest memories were of the three of them and their adventures. In 1962, they travelled to Cornwall and Devon together for the 'Ten Tors' competitive hike on Exmoor as part of their physical training. But Nilsen was unable to finish due to his weak legs, and he vowed he would never let this happen again. Soon, he started to show an aptitude for cross-country running. But no amount of 'manning up' seemed to be able to rid him of his homosexual thoughts. The tightly scheduled days might have kept them at bay for a while, but there was nothing he could do about the nights.

Nor was there anything he wanted to do. Nilsen's dreams became a comfort to him; he seems to have gone as far as trying to plan them in advance. There is one he still remembers vividly today. It was benign and involved him and a friend lying warm and naked under a fur blanket in a cabin while a blizzard blew outside. In contrast to most of Nilsen's later sexual experiences which rarely got beyond the physical, in this fantasy he cherished a sense of togetherness. Still, it wasn't an equal relationship; Nilsen enjoyed the thought of a submissive partner he could protect. It was the two of them against the world. He wrote in *History of a Drowning Boy:* 'We would stay there in warm comfort together forever. We never talked in the dreams. We would get up occasionally to eat food silently before a blazing fire. We would listen to the outside world on the radio. It was bliss, naked under these furs, in each other's arms and the soft smoothness of his skin against mine. Strangely, we never fucked in these dreams. Very odd.'

The boys in this fantasy always had to conform to a certain androgynous physical type. Other than that, they could be of any race. Nilsen loathed racism in all forms and was determined never to discriminate. Here, in the parade squares of Aldershot, Nilsen says that around him in the 500-strong regiment he was disconcerted that he could only see 'one Indian and no

blacks'. He comments that it upset him whenever he heard 'nigger' jokes. Nilsen found black men attractive but oriental men were his favourite: 'I did, however, develop certain sexual, physical preferences in my males. I liked smooth men. Hairy men were a complete sexual turn off for me. I liked Chinese, Japanese and Filipinos; in fact, any type as long as they were smooth-skinned. Fat and well-muscled males, again, were a complete sexual turn off. I suspect that my attraction to Orientals has a lot to do with the fact that a lot of them display the characteristics of boys.'

Photographs from this period show an excited young man in round glasses and a smart green jumper getting on with the various activities of barrack life. He was healthy and well-disciplined and as happy 'packing' beds and scrubbing floors as any 16-year-old might be expected to be. After a year-and-a-half, Nilsen was made a junior corporal, and put in charge of a dorm of younger boys. There was one half-Dutch boy that he took a particular shine to. One day, Nilsen found him in his bed space crying. Nilsen claims that he wanted to put his arms around him and talk to him like 'Mum', but that wasn't 'what big, tough corporals did'.

Nilsen, however, was hardly considered a big, tough corporal – although his colleague, Eric Talbot, in a television interview remembered him occasionally trying to impress by trying to throw his weight around.

Nilsen was, in fact, extremely insecure. He remembers his biggest fear on arriving at Aldershot being the prospect of the communal showers. He thought that his genitals might be smaller than everyone else's and, more importantly, he might start to get an erection at the sight of other naked bodies. There was a rumour that when this had happened before, other boys had responded by 'shoving a broomstick up his arse'. In the end, the showers proved nothing to worry about.

There was still, however, plenty in his behaviour that some found odd. Some would laugh about his stupid grin or the fact he seemed prudish about girlie magazines. Yet to others he was just normal and quiet. Dusty Payne, a platoon sergeant, couldn't believe it when he saw the news in 1983. Could this really be the Dennis Nilsen he'd known in the 1960s? Later, after reading articles in the papers, there was no mistaking it. He wrote first to the governor at Albany and later to Nilsen. Payne told the governor he remembered Dennis as a reserved lad who performed his job conscientiously and whom he recommended for Junior Sergeant. He also,

somewhat surprisingly, thought he remembered Nilsen's mother visiting, and her being a 'quiet, warm lady'.

Payne thought something drastic must have subsequently happened to Nilsen for his mind to have become so dark. In a letter he wrote to Nilsen's prison governor, he speculates as to whether it could have been his time serving in Aden. Something, however, was already wrong in Aldershot. On the outside Nilsen may have seemed a 'loner who did the job to the best of his ability', but behind his exterior appearance, his 'inner film' had now developed into a serious condition. It was threatening to undermine his ability to differentiate between the world as it was and existence as he liked to imagine it. 'I had two separate lives,' Nilsen writes in his autobiography, 'the real life and the fantasy life. When I was with people I was in the "real" world and in my own private life I snapped easily into my fantasy life. I could oscillate from one to the other with instant ease.'

As had been so when he had reached puberty, Nilsen felt as if he were a film director controlling his own imagination. When, after three years, he passed the 'senior education test', he was disappointed that he 'had no one to cheer [him] on except the heroes in [his] mind'. One imagines internally, though, he was imagining a triumphal scene climaxing in the year of 1964 with everyone throwing their berets in the air.

The military exams Nilsen had taken were generally considered to be an equivalent to school O-levels. He ended up with a solid but unremarkable five passes: Maths, English, Map-reading, Current Affairs and Catering Science. Most importantly for his future army career, he also passed the B2 catering exam. And even though Nilsen was to be a cook rather than a soldier, he had still developed well enough physically, completing full training on foot, arms and weapons drills. When, at 18, he took part in the passing-out parade in the summer of 1964, he says he felt ready for 'the man's army'.

That summer he went home to Strichen for a brief period of leave. On the second weekend he hired a scooter to go to Fraserburgh to see Granny. He skidded on some mud and hit his head quite badly, but no serious damage was apparent. Nilsen was upbeat, proud to show what he was doing with his life. He eagerly spoke of the excitement of his first posting. This was to be in Osnabruck in north-western Germany. Family members were

pleased, if surprised, that the quiet boy writing poetry upstairs had not merely survived life as a cadet but wanted more.

Nilsen, of course, knew his time in Germany was going to be a more rugged adventure than anything he had experienced in the south of England. But he thought it would just be more exciting. So far, the experience of leaving the backwater of Fraserburgh for Aldershot had proved the right thing to do. He had no reason to think that the adult Army would do anything other than further expand his horizons.

Some months before his nineteenth birthday, Nilsen was driven over to Germany in a coach full of young men. The NATO barracks were a large, concrete complex surrounded by fields and woodland just outside Osnabruck's medieval market town centre. The British Army presence was part of the wider NATO mobilisation in Europe during the Cold War.

Nilsen was attached to the Catering Corps within the Royal Fusiliers. He continued to train as a soldier and practice field manoeuvres, but his working life was focused around cooking in the mess. The team was headed up by the squadron quartermaster sergeant 'Badger' Maitland who was quick-witted and hearty. Nilsen admired him, and the fact he liked a drink made him approachable. Likewise, the cooks he worked with were an amiable, 'hard-working, boozy lot'. Nilsen was soon very taken with the drinking culture. Within the barracks complex there were various bars, with some catering to individual squadrons, while others, like the NAAFI bar, were for everyone. It was much more exciting, however, to go out to the city centre at weekends.

As Nilsen casts his mind back, rather than recalling his work or the intricacies of life in the barracks, he mainly mulls on his socialising. He remembers being someone who drank to ease his shyness but who was still one of the lads. It's unlikely, however, that others saw him the same way. The testimony of various colleagues indicates he was seen as the squaddie who couldn't hold his drink, and whose low tolerance, in turn, made him irritating to those around him – especially when Nilsen started to get drunk and spoiled others' chances with girls.

Dennis Nilsen's homosexuality was well hidden. Being gay was still far from being tolerated in the Army. Nilsen would therefore follow others to various rough and ready watering holes and pretend to be equally excited

about the hunt for girls. One Saturday night, in one of the pubs far from the city centre, Nilsen's entire squadron were questioned about a shooting in a bar. They had been in the area when a man shot a local taxi driver after an argument. The murderer was Leslie Grantham who would later find fame in the 1980s as 'Dirty Den' in the BBC soap opera *EastEnders*.

Nilsen spent just over two years in northern Germany. As a private, he slept in a 'bed space' in a medium-sized dorm. Towards the end of his two years in Germany, dorm inspections were sufficiently relaxed that Nilsen even managed to keep a dog called Rexie. He named it after his first cuddly toy, which he says his mother threw away in a bid to tidy up.

It is while describing his posting to Osnabruck that Nilsen's memoirs start to change tone. The exuberance and lightness of youth is increasingly replaced by descriptions of his dark, fantasy life. Often the lines between reality and desires seem blurred. This was particularly so one Sunday morning, when Nilsen says he woke up to find himself passed out on top of a mattress with a fat, young German called Hans. They were in a flat on the outskirts of town. Nilsen assumes that they had just passed out in the same room after a night's drinking. He spent the next day, however, imagining that the man had interfered with him.

It pleased him to think that he might have been abused while totally passed out: 'My mind thrilled at the thought of this fat German undressing and fondling me,' he says. The fact the other man was fat and ugly accentuated Nilsen's desire to feel androgynous. He desperately wanted some sexual activity to have happened. While he was working, he would daydream about scenarios where a sex-starved young squaddie might try to relieve some sexual tension with him. And how much more likely would that have been to occur than if he was out cold and passive? This, in turn, led to him pretending when he was out drinking to pass out in the hope that someone would carry him home and take pleasure in his body.

Nilsen's strange behaviour when drunk eventually also got him into fist fights. He is careful to avoid discussion of these in his memoirs. They are, however, recorded in his army record, including one particular all-day drinking session which ended up with him getting into a fight which later required medical attention. Nilsen does, however, describe one incident he was ashamed of. It involved his dog Rexie, and was like a watered-down version of his earlier story about killing the cat. One afternoon, he says, he

placed the dog on top of his locker and terrified her by growling, just to see her cower. He describes seeing her fear which ‘excited a frisson of power’ within him. Eventually, she fell off the locker and cut herself on his bed. At that point, the cruel mood broke and he says he remembers starting to cry with guilt.

In January 1967, Nilsen was informed of a new posting. It was in Aden in the Gulf of Arabia, now part of the state of Yemen. This British Protectorate had found itself in a state of emergency after a series of terrorist attacks from Islamic extremists. A decade or so since the Suez crisis, Britain was now considering whether the time had come to leave the port of Aden. If the time had almost come to leave, however, Harold Wilson’s Government didn’t want the action of anti-colonial terrorists to be the trigger.

Fuelled by increasingly radical Islamic fervour, the rebels became more and more obsessive. Just as in modern-day Afghanistan, troops operated in near-impossible heat and difficult terrain against a fanatical opposition. Nilsen describes being flown over in a VC10 airliner. When he arrived in Arabia, it was like ‘walking into the blast of a baker’s oven’. He thought the terrorists seemed in complete disarray with ‘everyone intent on killing everyone else’ and ‘the only point of agreement being killing the English’.

Nilsen’s kitchen served the Military Provost Staff Corps. They were in charge of detainees at the Al Mansoura Prison. The prison was a walled fort, with a disused gallows guarded by gun towers. The town of Al Mansoura is now a suburb of Aden City. At that time it was a warren of low-rise, breeze-block buildings with a single road running through them. It was situated five miles from the city and port of Aden. The military complex was basic and functional. Unlike the tented townships that made up other military bases, however, the barracks here were buildings built out of red clay. Their colour merged in with the surrounding desert.

On active service, even the cooks were required to take full part in the patrolling. As Nilsen walked the dusty roads, he says he would see dead bodies casually discarded by the roadside. He says he didn’t find anything exciting in the ‘shot-up mechanics of death’ while also pointing out he didn’t like to think of attractive male bodies spoiled. The way he talks suggests those bodies didn’t excite him, but they certainly helped desensitise him to the reality of death. He started to become very blasé

about his own safety, volunteering for dangerous patrols and, when off duty, drinking copiously before wandering off on his own. It was an impulse he didn't understand.

One afternoon, while off duty at the Steamer Point army base, near the old city, Nilsen decided to hitch-hike his way the few miles to Al Mansoura. He was picked up by a lorry, which then drove straight through terrorist-ridden areas. Nilsen says that although he was wearing his 'civvies', there could be no mistaking what he was. He thinks the only reason he survived may have been because the rebels assumed that he was part of a set-up.

Yet he says he was excited by the experience. Again, he offers no explanation as to why the line between life and death was so thrilling. It is likely, however, that being in a conflict zone had reawakened his childhood fascination with death and sex. It is also likely that Nilsen can't fully remember what did and didn't happen. The whole experience of being in Aden was so different from anything a young British soldier might have experienced; it would surely have had a dreamlike quality. Nilsen's imagination would have amplified that. Even the geography would have appeared fantastical. The city of Aden nestled in a volcanic crater connected to the mainland by an isthmus. Zealots who looked like they had come straight out of a film lived in a harsh desert, further inland.

Nilsen liked to re-imagine one incident over and over again. It was even cited at his trial as an example of his difficulty in separating fact and fantasy. The event occurred one Friday evening when Nilsen had gone with others to cool down in the Oasis bar in Aden city. After a night's drinking, and unsteady on his feet, he decided to hail a cab back. He says he did so casually, as if 'in the West End of London', not 'somewhere where any Westerner was likely to be killed'. In the back, full of rum and beer, he passed out on the leatherette seat.

Suddenly, he felt a violent blow to the back of his neck. Nilsen passed out. When he came to, he was naked in the boot with his clothes in a pile beside him. The cool metal was pressing into his body. Outside, someone was turning the lock. Nilsen felt a sense of detachment. As soon as the boot was opened, he says he hit the ugly, old taxi driver with a jack. The man slumped to the ground, motionless. He took the man's clothes and ran for it.

Whatever happened, it certainly wasn't as described. The reasons for Nilsen's confusion between reality and imagination in this particular story,

however, become clear in his autobiography. This incident was part of the same developing fantasy theme as the 'Fat Hans' scenario. Some kind of altercation probably did happen in that taxi, but Nilsen wanted it to have been much more unpleasant than it was. He wanted to imagine he had been stripped by an old man and interfered with. He wanted sex, and for it to be close to an experience of death.

Another far-fetched story does, however, contain a greater ring of authenticity. Again, it involved the line between life and death. Nilsen occasionally drank with one particular private who was full of stories and enjoyed impressing his colleagues. One afternoon, during a quiet period, the private told Nilsen he had something interesting to show him. He led him through a set of doors, which gave out into a large courtyard; in the middle stood a fully operational gallows. The private's job was to perform routine maintenance. Although unused, it was kept in working order.

Fascinated, Nilsen climbed the scaffold. His friend shouted up that if you supported your body weight with your arms on the rope, you could probably put the noose around your neck and drop down the trap-door. He was half joking, but that, though, was exactly what Nilsen did. He pulled the noose over his neck and then took the weight and dangled over the open hole. 'I was buzzing with fear and excitement … my eyes drawn to the gaping hole of eternity,' he says. His friend rushed up the steps, frightened that Nilsen's arms weren't strong enough. But as he reached him, Nilsen had swung back onto the platform and was grinning.

By June 1967, Nilsen was posted further round the Gulf to what is now known as the United Arab Emirates. Then, they were called the Trucial States, an area where the British had signed a truce with the local sheikhs. Nilsen was to be the head of kitchen at the Trucial Oman Scouts officers' mess at Sharjah. Oil had just been struck in nearby Dubai and money was starting to flow into the area. The TOS was a British paramilitary outfit intended to keep order in various protectorates and Sheikdoms across the Gulf. Life in Sharjah couldn't have been more different from the posting in Aden. It was like going from hell to a holiday. Around him, Nilsen saw people wearing distinctive patterned Arab head-dresses. They reminded him of scenes from *Lawrence of Arabia*, one of his favourite films.

Dennis Nilsen was finally able to relax. Agreeable evenings were spent drinking with servicemen and ex-pats. This was also where Nilsen experienced his first significant sexual experience. It was with one of the teenage Arab boys assigned to clean the officers' rooms. These 'bearers' had the responsibility of tidying the rooms, washing and cleaning kit. Nilsen alleges that some had got into the habit of providing sexual favours in return for money to take back to their impoverished families. If it stretches the imagination to suppose such practice was rife, it's not totally implausible they occasionally happened.

Now that Nilsen was an NCO Corporal, he had his own room. One evening, after bringing in some laundry, a boy of about 14 lingered. Nilsen says his nerves and inexperience almost resulted in him walking out. But just as the boy was turning around, the corporal realized what was going on and urged him to stay. With sentimental hyperbole, Nilsen describes their sexual liaison in *History of a Drowning Boy*. He said he felt 'wedded to him' and thinks the boy didn't really want money because he felt the same way, too: 'He enquired, "You like nice boy?" My brain was playing the "Hallelujah Chorus". I stretched out my hand. "Come over here," I intoned, and patted the bed. He did as I had bidden and I took one of his hands in mine. I placed his hand on the hard, straining, 7in baton clearly shaped through my jeans … he lay on his back and looked up at me with those deep-brown, doe-like eyes.'

Nilsen claims to have had sex with the boy (although elsewhere he claims he didn't actually have full sex until the age of 27) and that he was the active partner. Whether or not this was an exaggeration, Nilsen probably did have his first homosexual experience in Arabia with a teenage boy prostitute.

The way he talks about the months that followed indicate a change. He had suddenly become enlivened to the possibility he might yet be a sexual being. Now, when Nilsen went to the Carlton Hotel in Dubai, he did so feeling homosexually experienced and grown up. This bolstered his ego, which, in turn, helped him to believe that the oil executives sipping on their Martinis were eying him up as a rent boy. He thought this was a bloody cheek and switched to the Royal Flying Kunjah Club, where he fell in with a group of heavy drinkers. Nilsen describes them as 'kindred rebel spirits'. He was particularly fond of a young man nicknamed 'Smithy'. When the

Combined Services Entertainment flew in Harry Secombe, Mike Yarwood and Dickie Henderson, Nilsen remembers sitting next to him. They enjoyed the impersonations of Mike Yarwood, and found Harry Secombe's gooning around hilarious, but Nilsen became upset when Henderson came on and started singing the song 'Love and Marriage' with the words 'John and Mary, *John and Mary … she's a lesbian and he's a fairy …*'

The following week, Smithy fell off his Land Rover and died. The incident added to an array of psychologically volatile factors. That this was all happening against a backdrop that only seemed half real may well have made things worse. In front of him, life was quickly and easily turning to death. Many of those lives were of young men with whom Nilsen wanted a forbidden intimacy. He was driven to ever deeper secrets and, the more private his fantasies, the more they skewed off at tangents.

If one single event could be said to have led to Nilsen's later desire to possess dead bodies, it almost certainly happened one afternoon in Sharjah. This is the first indication we get in Nilsen's manuscript that his internal life had moved from disturbing gay fantasies to abnormal, paraphilic, sexual fixations.

Nilsen's room had a lock and he had got into the habit of using it to ensure total privacy while he spent afternoons masturbating in the nude. Sometimes, he would admire himself in the mirror while doing so. One day, he realized, using the free-standing mirror, he could create an effect whereby he could visually 'split' his personality such that it felt he was enjoying a sexual act with another man. This was narcissism in a very specific sense, Nilsen writes: 'It was a very large mirror and I came to over-admiring myself in it … I would become aroused by my relaxed body … I imagined someone (the mirror's view) looking at me and lusting after my body. In fact, I was lusting over my own body.'

The next step in the ritual was lying on the bed while positioning himself so that his head was no longer visible. He, the watcher, was one person, the passive reflection another. As the watcher, he would play one role: 'The man dominating the body had no face but he was always a dirty, grey-haired, old man.' The boy in the mirror was a smooth, passive 'victim'. This, too, would be Nilsen. As he developed this fantasy, he would take turns in playing both roles. The fantasies again derived from

experiences like the Fat Hans/Arab taxi driver incidents. All future fantasies would also follow the same pattern of an older, powerful, brutal individual dominating a young, smooth, lifeless body.

Over the course of the summer, the fantasies escalated. Nilsen remembers one, in particular, frightening him. It was a scene imagined to be in the Second World War and again involved an old Arab. The other body now was not merely passive – it was an attractive, blond, young Nazi soldier who'd been recently killed. In his imagination, before the Arab finally has sex with the dead boy's body, he washes and carries it, just as Nilsen would later do with the men he killed. The fantasy ended with the old man having full sex with the dead body. Nilsen says he 'loosened his hold on the boy's back and legs and his naked form flopped askew in limp rest, still impaled on the man, spread-eagled in pure lust'.

The worse Nilsen's private sex fantasies became, the more psychologically isolated he also found himself. His internal world was so far removed from anything that he could possibly ever talk about, he had no problem walking out of his room with an innocent expression. As such, none of Nilsen's colleagues had any reason to suspect that when Corporal Nilsen came out of his room he had been doing anything other than taking an afternoon nap.

In January 1968, Nilsen returned to the UK and was posted to the 1st Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders at Seaton Barracks, Plymouth. Being back in familiar surroundings quelled his wilder fantasies. Besides, with no locks on the doors, he couldn't carry on masturbating in front of mirrors. Instead, he just spent more time watching TV. But despite home soil helping to normalise Nilsen's sexual mindset, two incidents from that time are revealing. The second was, in fact, in all probability, another crucial step on the path towards becoming a killer.

The first happened in the barracks in Plymouth one Saturday night. Nilsen was watching late-night TV. In a dormitory down the corridor, some young privates had smuggled in a local barmaid. As Nilsen walked down to use the toilet, he heard a whimpering sound. With a mixture of curiosity and concern, he popped his head round the door. He was appalled to see his comrades were taking it in turns to have sex with the girl. Cowardice, however, stopped him intervening. Instead, he just went to bed, saying

nothing. The next day, he considered he had failed the girl. But although he says he was ashamed, he also clearly took some pride in the fact that he could consider himself a good, compassionate man, unlike those others who had been involved in the attack.

This story may also have been included to prepare the reader for the next new confession. Nilsen's first sex attack was callous and opportunistic. It shows that by the age of 22, he had lost any compunction about serious sexual assault. This incident he describes may not have quite matched the 'fantasy ritual' that later would characterise the killings, but the fact that the victim was unconscious is significant. Nilsen's behaviour before and after also showed he'd now managed to compartmentalise sexual matters completely from the rest of his life. Where sex was concerned, there were no limits.

It started when a chance conversation at his barracks revealed that he and a young private, Frank, were to be sharing a long train journey to Bristol (the details have been changed for obvious reasons). They decided to travel together and, once the train pulled away, started drinking in the buffet car. When their money ran out, they moved on to their supply of beer cans and whisky. As the train drew level with Coventry, the young man passed out. Nilsen realised that he had an advantageous position. He carried the half-conscious man to the toilet and propped him so the man's head was lolling around the toilet seat. This gave him an idea for how to knock him out. He started to let the man's head smash against the toilet bowl. Then he undressed and orally abused him while inserting his finger into his anus. All the time, Nilsen had an erection and contemplated whether he might rape him. People, however, were banging on the door. 'Fear took over and I hurriedly washed him and washed the stain on his jacket,' he says. After it was over, Nilsen was able to carry on as if nothing had happened.

Later, during this period of leave, Nilsen decided to go up to Scotland to visit his family. Once occupied with family business, the sexual assault hardly seemed to exist for him. He was pleased to hear his sister Sylvia had married the son of one of the local dairy farmers. Still, he was a little concerned that, at 16, she was a little young to have got hitched. But at least she had got out of the Broch – they had emigrated to Toronto, Canada. His brother Olav, meanwhile, had married a Geordie girl. Nilsen was glad to see that his older brother had only got as far as working in a nearby factory.

Betty Scott would later tell reporters how she remembered Dennis being keen to impress with his cooking and seeming in good spirits. In the evenings, he would be quieter, retiring to his room, as was his custom, to write poetry. No doubt, at other times he would have talked excitedly about how he would be returning to Germany. There was a short stint in Cyprus to see out and then he was off to West Berlin.

One thing Nilsen didn't say was that he had heard the city had begun to re-establish its pre-war reputation for decadence and hoped this might include homosexual possibilities. When Nilsen arrived a month later, he was stationed at the Montgomery barracks, set in woodland in the Spandau district near the border. The 24-year-old corporal's predictions seemed to be partly correct. There was both more drink going around, and more sex. It was not, however, the sort he was seeking. 'The lads' encouraged Nilsen to visit a prostitute one night.

The brothel was in a central location, probably of the sort where two or three girls were set up in a small flat. Nilsen was afraid of what his friends would think if he refused, so he went along with what everyone else was doing. The girl would have seen him as no different from many other drunken customers. She aroused him with her mouth, before getting on top. Nilsen was then, more or less, a passive participant. He was pleased that he managed to ejaculate. It proved that to him that he could, at least, be bisexual. But still, he says, he had no particular inclination to repeat the experience, especially when sober.

The homosexual opportunities he had hoped for did not materialise in Berlin. This posting did, however, give him the opportunity to take up a hobby that had long fascinated him. On his NCO's pay packet, he had found that, almost without trying, he was saving money. Then, one afternoon, presumably in the Friedrichstrasse near Checkpoint Charlie, he saw an 8mm movie camera for sale. On an impulse, he bought it. He subsequently started to film everything he saw. He even took his new toy to an anti-Vietnam demonstration, where he filmed the authorities tear-gassing the protestors.

When he told his colleagues about what he had been doing, they laughed at him. It would have been an odd thing for any British soldier to be doing but, in his case, it was just another sign of his peculiarity. In Nilsen's mind, however, he was a colourful 'outsider' figure. He imagined how he might be portrayed in a movie, getting up to all kinds of crazy schemes. The next

week he wrote to the Ministry of Defence asking to film Rudolph Hess in Spandau. But although their reply implied they thought him a little mad, nothing more was made of it.

Briefly, Nilsen sounds as if he might have been quite happy. For a while, he put his deepest sexual preoccupations out of his mind and just enjoyed the opportunities afforded by travelling with the Army. In January 1970, at the age of 24, he was sent to Bodenmais ski resort in Bavaria. Here, the Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders were taught alpine skills as part of their complete combat training. The ski school was based up around an old mountain farmhouse overlooking the Zeller Valley and Nilsen's job required him to cater for 30 officers and NCOs in a large and spotlessly clean kitchen. Nilsen felt that the locals liked him, but he was disturbed because there was still simmering Nazi sympathy there.

There were also frequent opportunities to socialise. All the time Nilsen was mixing with the locals, he never betrayed his innermost sexual feelings. He describes one evening as an example. There was a beer festival taking place, and one night he went to a party at a Biergarten belonging to a local character called Hans. Hans loaned Nilsen a pair of Lederhosen to wear for the evening. One of the local girls flirted with Nilsen that night. He thought she looked a bit like Natalie Wood and was delighted when she kissed him on the verandah. It provided perfect cover for his real thoughts which were fixed on a young private. He was pleased to have fooled everyone. 'I'm a better actor than Rock Hudson ever was,' he boasts.

After Bavaria, Nilsen was soon transferred to Fort George in Inverness-shire, only 70 miles from his birthplace. The barracks practically adjoined the battlefield of Culloden Moor where the Jacobite rebellion was quashed in 1746, something that Nilsen would most probably have been aware of, and might have been frequently inclined to lecture others about. But while this may have wound up his colleagues, no one could complain about the quality of Nilsen's work. He had become an efficient and reliable cook, reaching Grade B. In August 1970, Nilsen was then transferred across the Cairngorms to Ballater where the Queen's Royal Guard (Balmoral) was based. Despite his proximity to Strichen, however, Nilsen never took the opportunity to visit his family.

Nilsen's last posting in the Army should have been the most convivial and relaxing of his career, as it was for most of those posted to the NATO Ace High signals station at Maybury on the Shetland Isles. The military base was located at the southerly tip of the largest island. The dramatic beauty spots of Sumburgh and Fitful Head were nearby. In this small community, the locals and the servicemen – mainly signals engineers – mixed freely and everyone knew everyone else's business. Eligible women outnumbered the bachelors, and there was a lively dating scene. Nilsen's disastrous crush on a young Welsh soldier, however, started a chain of events that would lead him to be cast into bedsit life in London, romantically frustrated, and without any supportive influences.

Corporal Nilsen spent almost two years at Maybury. During this period, he saw himself as a romantic, artistic figure. He talks as if he was now comfortable in his sexuality but frustrated by the lack of opportunity. Without any outlet for his sexual desires, he says he divided his spare time between filming the areas of natural beauty on the island, like Fitful Head, and joining the drinking crowd at the Maybury Club.

Others remember things differently. One such contemporary, now in his sixties – we'll call him Rob Ferrier – was a 26-year-old NCO when he met Nilsen. He first emailed me in 2005 after seeing my *Sunday Times* magazine piece online. Knowing I had read Nilsen's book made him curious to know what Nilsen had said about Maybury. He also wondered just how much of Nilsen's material I believed.

Some days later, we spoke for the first time on the phone. 'Having been stationed with the bloke, and having seen documentaries, I have often been struck how much journalists assume what he says is actually true,' he told me, adding, 'I would advise anyone writing about him to take his autobiographical claims with a large pinch of salt.'

Ferrier is a jolly, slightly grizzled character with the build of a former rugby player. He has a good memory, and his recollections are consistent with many details found in *History of a Drowning Boy.* However, when I wrote to Nilsen to ask him what he remembered of Ferrier, his reply was, 'Who … and exactly *what* … is he?' Could he really not remember, or did he not want anyone else to challenge his version of events?

Ferrier recalls Nilsen's overriding characteristic at 25 years of age being immaturity. He remembers him constantly trying to impress and says he had

a ‘very low tolerance to alcohol which he would still consume at every possible opportunity’. Nilsen also had one particularly irritating habit – he would jump out from behind bushes and wave his movie camera at courting couples behind the Maybury Club. Yet, although people considered him a bit awkward socially, nobody guessed he might be homosexual. Ferrier even asked me whether it might be possible that Nilsen resorted to gay sex because he was such a failure with women. It seemed strange to many that he was such a flop with the girls – he wasn’t bad looking, after all. Most concluded that he drove them away though a combination of poor personal hygiene, clumsy manners, and a habit of becoming intoxicated after half a pint.

Nilsen’s own recollections of his drinking and socialising during this period are again confused with his sex dreams. He describes one incident that took place in the spring of 1971, where he says he was given a ‘Micky Finn’ or spiked drink from a local who then interfered with him while he slept. It reads like a carbon copy of the incident involving ‘Fat Hans’ and what he hoped he’d do to him. Ferrier was bemused when I asked him about this. He says there could have only been one possible candidate and he could never have been audacious enough.

When Nilsen’s mind wasn’t on sex or work, it was on his home movies. Whether or not he spent as much time filming nature and or creating dramatisations involving friends as he claims, he definitely did become a projectionist at the Cine Club. His enthusiasm resulted in his being sent on the short Services Kinema Corporation (SKC) course at Beaconsfield. After a fortnight, he returned, qualified to set up the 16mm cinema equipment. But now that he knew a little, he started to tell others what to do. His manner and interference exasperated everyone.

The story was the same in the workshop where soldiers were encouraged to practice hobbies. One afternoon, he tried to work a large piece of mahogany on a lathe without first centring it. When it came off, he almost knocked out the instructor. Worse was to come with his pets. A shop in the island’s capital stocked exotic animals. Nilsen’s first purchase was a Mynah bird, which he let fly freely around the room he shared with a colleague. A senior officer, the next day, told him to return it. Some months later, he replaced it with a mud turtle he named Napoleon XIV (after the band that had had a hit with the novelty song ‘They’re Coming to Take Me Away, Ha-

Ha'). Initially, he kept it under his bed in a piece of polystyrene packing covered by mud and water. Ferrier told me: 'The smell was atrocious! At this stage, the RSM gave up. He was approaching retirement. Nilsen's roommate was less than amused. Nilsen used to feed the beast lumps of raw meat. He would wait until the Cook Sergeant was out doing the daily shop and sneak it into the kitchen, where he would feed it on the food prep table.

'His sense of humour was such that he'd challenge people to try to take the meat from the turtle. It would sit there with its foot/flipper pinning down the chunk of meat. Nilsen would make comments like, "I bet he'd prefer some fresh flesh, like from you!" He'd make such comments to visiting women.'

Corporal Nilsen would also try to make himself seem more intelligent than others by ostentatiously referring to the books he had recently read. On one occasion, this was a collection of the Marquis de Sade's writings. He delighted in trying to shock others with it. But when Ferrier quoted it back to him a month later, he says Nilsen struggled to place what was being said. Most of the 'boys' thought him a pseudo-intellectual.

Nilsen did, however, earn some respect for his natural artistic flair. Photographs he had taken hung in the clubhouse for years after he left. He remained, however, much more interested in moving pictures. After a short stint back in Scotland catering for the Signals engineers, he returned to the Shetlands in the spring of 1972 and spent much of his spare time with his movie camera. He shot the annual Viking festival and the seas and skies by the cliffs of Fitful Head. Then, in May, he met someone with whom he felt he could share his artistic passions.

Terry (his name has been changed) was actually just a homesick, naïve 18-year-old, easily dominated by older and more forceful personalities. He was small, with blond hair and was youthfully handsome. Nilsen liked to teach him to use the projector and to take him to the local beauty spots to act out little scenes. In his autobiography, Nilsen remembers, 'We worked, played and walked the sheer scenic beauty of the high, rugged cliffs and the golden stretch of Quendale Bay. I filmed him running, jumping, and in the full range of usual situations.'

Some of these scenarios apparently involved Terry playing dead, and Nilsen talks about how he would review the footage in the evenings. 'I was certainly excited by a passive image of him. There was no gore or anything

like that involved. Afterwards, when he was not around, I would watch all the footage of him and afterwards needed to go to the bathroom and masturbate.'

Cross-country running gave Nilsen another excuse to spend time with Terry. At 26, despite the smoking and drinking, Dennis was in good physical shape. He would challenge Terry to long cross-country races. After a sprint finish to one run, they both collapsed on the grass. Lying and panting, Nilsen patted Terry on the chest. For him, it was a sign of intimacy and unspoken understanding. But just as Terry was beginning to find Nilsen annoying, the latter was beginning to become obsessed.

After drunken nights at the clubhouse, Nilsen would sidle up to Terry and pretend to have passed out. His hope was that Terry would touch him to revive him. One night, when Terry was drunk, homesick and apparently on the verge of tears, he took the opportunity to hold the young Welshman's hand. The fact that Terry didn't immediately remove it confirmed to him that there was an understanding between the two. He asked him into the Laundry Room, and says in his autobiography, 'As we were coming to the Laundry Store, I suddenly said to him, even taking myself by surprise, "We can go into the Laundry, as I've got the only key. We won t be disturbed." He replied, "I don't know what's happening." He pulled himself away and darted out of the outside door. "God," I thought, "You've really done it this time … you've lost him for good."'

Nilsen says he had a cigarette and then went to look for him. He was sitting, dejected, on the grass outside. The morning, he says, brought a 'drifting apart' which continued until their relationship 'exploded briefly'.

It started when Nilsen became convinced a Signals Sergeant was a closet homosexual trying to steal Terry away. Nilsen's anger and jealousy grew. He calls it 'a fissure in my life' and says that 'tremors were beginning to register on the obvious seismograph of my temperament'. He decided to confront the sergeant outside the hotel. Full of drink, he directly accused him of being homosexual and in love with Terry. Rob Ferrier told me he also remembers this night. Nilsen had turned up at the hotel drunk, and started ranting incoherently.

The next day, Nilsen then went to Fitful Head to contemplate a suicide bid by throwing himself off it. He came down and went to bed. Two days later, he decided to challenge Terry to a fight. He says, 'I wanted him to see

that I was hurt and angry. After I taunted him, he came at me with flying fists. He wrestled me to the ground. With blazing eyes and no words, he put his hands around my neck. I stared mutely at his wild expression and saw the red fever in his eyes … It was all finished. It was not the only thing that was over. I had already decided that I would let my current time in the Army expire without enlisting for a further three years … I could see no workable future for a homosexual in the British Army. There comes a time when we outgrow living out of a military kit bag and moving around like a gypsy.'

Nilsen also gives two others reasons for leaving the Army. The first was homophobia; second, he says he was ashamed of the conduct of the British Army in the Bloody Sunday Massacre, where 13 civilians had been shot dead in Londonderry in January 1972. Rob Ferrier remembers another incident which he says was the real reason Nilsen didn't re-enlist. It involved his mud turtle, Napoleon XIV. In an email to me, he says:

> *Eventually, Napoleon XIV was his downfall. His roommate became more and more angry and frustrated over the smell and filth in his room. This escalated into a full-scale row one night. The offended person had gone out drinking and had returned spoiling for a fight. I was awakened by the altercation and slamming of doors.*
>
> *When I went into the corridor, Nilsen was charging down the corridor from the kitchens brandishing two large boning knives (his tools). I ordered him to put down the weapons. He refused, waving them in my face. I repeated the order, qualifying it with the threat that, if I had to take them off him, I'd break his damned arms and then put him under arrest. That gave him pause and he dropped the knives and ran away. Meanwhile, his drunken roommate had clambered out his room window and disappeared.*
>
> *I thought, 'Bloody great, another bloody hero!' That was when I heard the sounds of a fight from the vicinity of the common room. The roommate had actually nipped around the outside of our quarters to tackle him from the rear. Having had enough, I decided to root the RSM out of his quarters and leave him to sort it all out.*
>
> *At the time, Nilsen was applying for extension of service beyond 12 years. His poor personal hygiene and the attendant disciplinary*

problems affected that application. I was personally consulted as to what disciplinary action should be taken against him. I suggested – and his Cook Sgt concurred – that the application for extension of service could be refused with no need for further action. He was gone within the month.

Before Nilsen left the Islands, he says he had one last drinking session which ended in his burning all his films. He couldn't, however, bring himself to burn the footage he had taken of Terry, and just before he left he gave Terry his personal projector and all the footage of him. Rob Ferrier is dubious that the fire could have been of any size or he would have remembered it.

As for Nilsen's 'exemplary' record, Ferrier suggests it was the Army's custom to send people out with a generous reference wherever possible. In truth, Nilsen's career had been blighted with more than just never making it past the rank of Corporal. Nilsen had frequently got into trouble, just never so seriously as to be formally disciplined. Still, Nilsen had got through, and now had a General Service Medal and life membership of the Army Catering Corps regimental association to show for the 11 years and three months he'd served. Those institutional skills were never more useful to him than in his first years in prison.

5

PRISON LIFE – THE FIRST DECADE

'We are dead men locked in a tomb; the living dead, privileged by selective animation. We are required to be neither seen nor heard.'
DENNIS NILSEN, IN A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR

Dennis Nilsen likes to tell people that, including the time he spent in the Army, and the police force as well as his prison sentence, he has spent most of his life in the service of Her Majesty. He is now fully institutionalised, having been in prison for over 30 years, with no prospect of release. Prisoner B62006 (Nilsen's original prisoner number – his current number is A6191AC) started his life sentence started on 4 November 1983 in Wormwood Scrubs.

After the trial, Nilsen was first taken to the reception area in the medical unit. When he got up the next morning, he would have seen that the Scrubs looked like a bigger version of Brixton. It was almost as cold and just as noisy. After a couple of days, Nilsen was taken from the hospital and brought to C-Wing. When he arrived in the exercise yard, he says the 'throng parted like the Red Sea'.

Settling into the new regime was, again, something he found particularly difficult. On remand, Nilsen had spoken of the need for his crimes to be punished. He even seemed to welcome jail as a way of cleansing his conscience. Now, the reality hit home. In Nilsen's literal and logical world, he had been prescribed a simple denial of liberty, not a hard, meaningless, negative life. When it came to it, he didn't welcome his punishment one bit.

Many inmates considered him a 'nonce' – slang for sex criminal – and felt free to give him as hard a time as they liked. He didn't fare much better among the others. Stories leaked to newspapers suggest Nilsen's intellectual pretensions made him seem arrogant. One of the first was 'JAIL MEN HATE NILSEN THE BRAGGER'. Nilsen cut it out and put it in a folder. Subsequently,

he would keep scrapbooks of every mention of him in the press along with comments about inaccuracies and the outrageous ‘monsterisation’ of him.

Nilsen was immediately designated a Category A prisoner – the highest security level, and one from which he has never been downgraded. His single cell measured approximately 6ft by 8ft. Inside the cold walls were an iron-framed bed and a desk. In 1983, Victorian prisons such as the Scrubs had not yet been converted to have in-cell toilets and sinks. Prisoners used buckets and bowls. Nilsen’s prison uniform was plain grey, like the bare painted walls. He was permitted a small amount of cell association – the time a prisoner is allowed to socialise in other inmate’s cells. Mainly, however, he chose to mix in the evenings in the TV room. There was also socialising at meals, exercise periods and work time. To begin with, however, Nilsen didn’t speak to many others.

If new friends were hard to come by, Nilsen was equally disappointed by people he used to know. Janet Leaman – the manager at the Kentish Town job centre who once offered support – had stopped writing after one letter. Then there was Martyn Hunter-Craig, the man who had almost walked in when Nilsen was dismembering Stephen Sinclair. After the trial, Nilsen had been puzzled that Hunter-Craig had paid him a visit in the cells. Now, he believed the reason was that he had been looking for stories to sell. It annoyed him intensely.

Nilsen and Hunter-Craig had first met in 1978 in the Crystal Room amusement arcade in Leicester Square. Hunter-Craig had been about 18 and Nilsen 32. The young drifter with a handlebar moustache hardly looked younger than the man who stood behind him. ‘You won’t win much on that,’ Nilsen had said with friendly cynicism. They got chatting, went for a drink and a pizza and eventually Nilsen invited Hunter-Craig back to his flat in Melrose Avenue. The evening went well. Over the next few years, Hunter-Craig became a frequent visitor.

When in March 1983 the police tracked Hunter-Craig down they asked him if he remembered anything suspicious in Nilsen’s behaviour during the time they had been friends. Hunter-Craig immediately remembered an incident which clearly suggested his friend had once tried to kill him. It was one morning in 195 Melrose Avenue when he had woken up to find the room filled with smoke. Nilsen had told him he’d been trying to dry a

towel. Now, however, he admits, in fact, he had been trying to knock his friend out before strangling him. This was one story Nilsen didn't mind him selling. Other stories, like the *Sunday People*'s 'HITLER FANTASY OF THE BEAST OF CRANLEY GARDENS', he deemed outrageous.

If such inaccuracies infuriated Nilsen, at least he could take comfort from the fact that people were talking about him. Although he relentlessly complains about their treatment (one section of his memoirs is subtitled 'The Monsterisation of a Multiple Killer: the Media Treatment of My Case'), the pages he devotes to analysing what was said about him are a sure indication that, without the infamy the papers gave him, he would have found it hard to be simply prisoner B62006.

During the day Nilsen liked to divert himself productively. In Wormwood Scrubs, all prisoners other than those on 'full-time education' were required to work. For a full week, Nilsen could earn a little over £20. He found life in the workshop cathartic. Five days before Christmas 1983, he recalls going in one morning to pack video games into boxes. The Flying Pickets' 'Only You' was playing on the radio in the background. Nilsen had previously only seen video games before in the Piccadilly arcades. He was impressed that people could now have them at home.

Nilsen left work that lunchtime in a good mood, feeling satisfied with himself. He was also looking forward to receiving a visitor that day. In the afternoon, Brian Masters – still writing *Killing for Company* – drove over to see him. He was still Nilsen's only visitor. Sitting opposite each other, surrounded by wives and kids, a small boy approached Nilsen with a half-eaten Mars Bar. 'Do you want a bit, mister?' he enquired.

With Masters in front of him, Nilsen couldn't resist the performance opportunity. Masters remembers him saying, 'No thank you. My mother taught me never to take sweets from strange kids.'

That afternoon was cold and turning windy. As the sun was going down, Nilsen remembers someone in the exercise yard whispering, 'You'd better watch your back, mate.' He went to sleep that night feeling uneasy, and trying to put the comment out of his mind. It occurred to him that people probably said that kind of thing a lot in prison.

The following afternoon, at the same time, Nilsen took his customary walk. Again the weather was foul. As Nilsen was sheltering by a wall

rolling a cigarette, a figure came over to join him. He looked up. Suddenly there was a soft blow to his left cheek. A metal object clattered to the ground. With blood dripping on to his shirt and his cigarette in his mouth, Nilsen realised that he'd been slashed across the cheek with a razor.

Later that day, and after giving the matter quite some thought, Nilsen identified the assailant as Albert Moffat, a small-time gangster, typical of the 'little men' who thought prison life could make them into big shots. But, despite his disdain, Nilsen had refused to let a prison warder take a Polaroid picture of his injuries. He says he didn't want to be seen cosying up to the police or prison service, or getting their help. He wanted everyone to know that, ultimately, he was still in charge.

The next day he read a story in the *Daily Mirror*, whose headline was 'RAZOR ATTACK ON KILLER NILSEN'. That afternoon he was summoned to the governor's office, to discuss segregating him off for his own safety. Nilsen resisted the idea, and eventually won. Showing potential aggressors that he would not be cowed was only part of his rationale. Nilsen had another reason for his 'strong man' behaviour. He explains he was still trying to impress David Martin from afar and didn't want rumours reaching the object of his former infatuation that Dennis Nilsen was a grass.

Martin had other things on his mind. The thought of returning to prison had plunged him into a deep depression. He soon started to feel suicidal. On 15 March, after receiving a 25-year sentence, he hanged himself in his cell in Parkhurst. Nilsen wrote to Brian Masters to say he felt he needed to do something. As he wasn't allowed to attend the funeral, he asked if Masters would go on his behalf.

Masters contemplated what he should do. By committing himself to such a serious project, he concluded he had entered into a series of obligations to the people involved – so he agreed. He delivered the single white and red roses Nilsen had ordered, along with the message that read 'In fondest love, Des'. In his media scrapbook, Nilsen noted that the *Sun* wrote a piece the next day headlined 'MONSTER'S TWO RED ROSES FOR HOUDINI'. They'd called him a monster and got the colour of the flowers wrong.

Some months later, when Moffat was brought to trial for the razor attack, Nilsen was still determined to carry on acting tough, despite no

longer having Martin to impress. On 18 June 1984, he was ordered to testify. Dressed in his suit and with his newly-grown moustache he again looked every inch the civil servant he'd once been. He hardly needed to give evidence; Moffat openly admitted to the attack.

His defence was that Nilsen had made homosexual advances and the incident had been prompted by a knife threat on him. After several hours' deliberation, the jury decided that there was insufficient evidence for a conviction. As he left the court, Moffat bragged Nilsen would be attacked again for being so arrogant.

In the autumn of 1984, Nilsen was transferred to Wakefield Prison in Yorkshire, a mixture of Victorian and new buildings; it now specialises in sex offenders. In 1984, it was a hard place full of hard men. Nilsen expected life to become increasingly bleak. He feared more attacks and resigned himself to longer periods spent in solitary confinement. Instead, in Christmas 1984, Nilsen started the most enduring romantic relationship of his life.

The 'romance' was with an armed robber called Jimmy Butler. He was from Yorkshire with a broad accent and gauche manners. Of medium height and build, he also looked remarkably like Keith Richards from the Rolling Stones. The armed robbery had initially landed him a life sentence but it was reduced to nine years on appeal.

Nilsen's manuscript describes being attracted both to Butler's left-wing leanings, and his naïveté. Despite his crimes, Nilsen saw in him a wounded, almost child-like 28-year-old. They soon started to refer to each other as 'brother', and would describe the regime and the government as 'the bastards'.

Butler also had abundant energy. He encouraged Nilsen to practise his chef's skills again, and the two of them ran a small curry business during recreation periods in the common room kitchenette. The facilities were intended for the preparation of food bought from the prison shop. In reality, the small electric oven was used more for food smuggled out of the kitchens.

Nilsen revels in his description of the black-market economy in prison. He also seems surprised to find that things really did seem to fit the stereotype of the prison movies he'd seen. The unofficial 'currency' was

‘tobacco, cannabis and any saleable commodity from the prison canteen’. Allegedly, there was a ‘bookie on every wing’, eager to relieve inmates of whatever was being used for money and, in turn, that ‘money’ could be spent on anything from pastries to having one’s laundry done. Nilsen also says that Butler deliberately courted the attention of men who were attracted to him. There was one in particular who had formed an especial attachment, a paunchy Scotsman whom we’ll call Graeme.

Nilsen and Butler’s romance started like teenagers hanging around in the dorms, and Graeme would invariably be found frequenting Butler’s cell. Butler would send notes to Nilsen asking him over. The three of them would sit there looking awkward and not knowing what to do. Triumphantly, Nilsen says that Jimmy eventually publically ‘dumped’ Graeme and started ‘going out’ with Des.

Nilsen’s descriptions of their early liaisons, significantly show what seems, for him, to be an unusual interest in someone’s character and not just their body. When they first met, Nilsen had just bought a new budgie, Hamish, which had fallen seriously ill. Butler wandered in and warmed the bird in his mouth, bringing it back to life. Nilsen saw this as an inner sensitivity, which, he says, he found appealing. What follows next, however, is a fairly graphic description of a homosexual affair. Like many such passages in the book, it is hard to decipher Nilsen’s primary aim: to prove a functioning sexuality – at the time of the trial he indicated that outside of his imagination he was asexual – or just to enjoy thinking about sex. Still, letters exchanged between Nilsen and Butler do show this was a genuine, two-way affair.

A little over four years later, in 1989, Butler would also corroborate their relationship in an interview with the *Sunday Mirror*: ‘To everyone else he is a monster, but I know the man. I am proud to have known him,’ he said. ‘No one else has been more special … he is the most caring person I have ever known.’

Butler and Nilsen offer different accounts of the end of their relationship. Butler says that Nilsen’s constant questioning about his unhappy childhood led to frequent arguments and eventually caused him to punch Des in the face. Such events were eventually too much for the governor, who had Butler transferred. Nilsen’s descriptions of their arguments – over Butler’s dislike of Nilsen’s cannabis and classical music,

and Nilsen's low tolerance of Butler's Bob Marley *Legend* album – sound more like an infatuation coming to an end.

By the end of 1984, with Butler gone and more time on his hands, Nilsen again started to brood about what he had done with his life. He decided – possibly quite sincerely – that he should atone for his past actions by living his prison life as constructively as possible, starting by developing his existing talents. Ideally he says he would have liked to have swapped his job in the workshop for the option of 'full-time education'. But this was over-subscribed, so he asked instead to apply to join an Open University course. The education department informed him that he could be eligible as long as he avoided psychology. He plumped for social sciences.

In the end, Nilsen's OU efforts came to an end after only three months. If, as seems likely, it was down to his own limited ability to stick at something, he won't admit so. Instead, he complains it was all down to the lousy way Wakefield Prison ran its education department. For example, he complains that they only provided one old black-and-white TV to watch the educational programmes. And if he wanted a tape player to listen to other lessons, he was told he would have to give up his record player. And there was no way, he says, he was going to let that happen.

Having failed with the OU, Nilsen decided to educate himself by listening to Radio 4, a habit that would become a permanent part of his prison life. But in Nilsen's scheme of personal rehabilitation, self-education wasn't sufficient. He also wanted to become politically active again. He felt there could be almost no end to the issues he might champion in prison. Nilsen the 'union man' was reborn. Prisoner B62006 started by dispensing practical advice to other inmates. Some, later, even wrote to him from their new prisons to thank him for his help. Such feedback was extremely important in helping Nilsen to believe that there was more to him than the murders. But, now, more than anything else, Nilsen wanted to know what Brian Masters had made of him.

In January 1985, Nilsen received an advance copy of *Killing for Company*. He devotes 10 pages of *History of a Drowning Boy* to his analysis. The first thing he disliked about it was the title. He'd wanted *The Case of Dennis Nilsen*, which, of course, would have given him star billing. His opinions on

the contents were more ambiguous, but still generally just as negative. On the one hand, he says the book was ‘the only serious study on my aberrant actions’; on the other, he calls it ‘another Monster book, cloaked in learned technique’.

By using a straightforward biographical style, Masters had made his starting point not a criminal phenomenon, but rather a human being who had done evil things. That his biographer didn’t simply assume he was subhuman had initially pleased Nilsen. But by the time he had got to the end of the book, he became extremely indignant that Masters seemed to conclude that Nilsen was not really fit to sit alongside other human beings.

In particular, Nilsen picked up on the little details; one was Masters’ speculation that he would happily butter his morning toast while there was a head boiling on the stove. In his typically literal way, Nilsen is quick to point out that the actual truth was that he lived on takeaways.

Another line that Nilsen particularly objected to was one that appeared in Masters’ conclusion: ‘It is Nilsen’s invulnerability to the squalor of human remains that makes him finally unrecognizable.’ Nilsen argues that because he would sometimes be sick when cutting up bodies he could not have been immune to the presence of rotting flesh. But he also partially contradicts this by questioning why people are so concerned by what he did to the dead bodies. The wicked thing, he says, was to kill. A corpse, on the other hand, can’t feel.

There are also passages in *History of a Drowning Boy* that indicate prisoner B62006 may also, partly, have been positively emotionally affected by someone having taken an interest in him. One sentence stands out as a fleeting sign of warmth: ‘I like Brian very much, with all his faults and weaknesses and I hope he feels the same towards me.’

By late 1985, neither Nilsen nor Masters could quite seem to work out their attitudes to the other. Masters was still visiting Nilsen and had also become a friend to his mother. He told me he could have just ‘dropped’ Nilsen after the book, but what would that have said about him? The situation he now found himself in, he reasoned, surely carried responsibilities. But after publication of the book, Masters’ public pronouncements on Nilsen appeared to become stronger, as if he felt he needed to emphasise the full horror of what he had done. That, at least, was how it seemed to Nilsen. When Prisoner B62006 heard Masters on the radio

or saw newspaper articles he had written, he became more and more resentful. He later expressed it to me with one of his soundbites: 'I'm afraid to pick up the phone,' he wrote, 'in case I get the answerphone saying, "Please speak after the high moral tone."'

Most of the reviews of *Killing for Company* applauded the skill with which Masters had handled the difficult balance to be struck. There was one dissenting voice – author Gordon Burn, writing for *Time Out*, felt that the many lengthy extracts from Nilsen's writings were tantamount to giving Nilsen a mouthpiece. He described Nilsen and Masters as being 'in business'; Nilsen had provided the story, he felt, and Masters had retired to the library to write it up without much further research. Such comments may have under-appreciated the skill and experience with which Masters rendered the material. But there was still, however, a danger that readers would simply read the extracts of Nilsen's writing and ignore the commentary. This was especially true because in the written word, and then through subsequent editing, Nilsen was more persuasive and articulate than he ever had been face to face.

Burn went on to write a highly acclaimed book on the Yorkshire Ripper case called *Somebody's Husband, Somebody's Son*. Brian Masters later found a point of comparison to his study of Nilsen with that of the American serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer (arrested in 1991). They were both gay men of a similar age, who lured back other gay men. A letter Nilsen wrote to Masters on the case, and the psychology behind such gay sex crimes, ended up in a piece the latter wrote for *Vanity Fair*.

By 1986, Nilsen was becoming militant about his sexuality. Now that AIDS had hit the public agenda, he wanted to campaign for gay rights in prison. He had even taken to walking around with a pink triangle sewn on to his uniform. It was a form of protest to allow condoms to be made freely available. When this went largely unnoticed, Nilsen wrote to the authorities. They replied that gay acts were contrary to 'good order and discipline'. Nilsen passed his observations over to the magazine *Gay Times*, including a comment from the authorities that the idea that prisoners could buy condoms with their own money was both ridiculous and offensive. Despite the source, the magazine felt that the issue of AIDS in prison deserved a mention.

And although Nilsen's crimes were against the gay community, letters written to him show that some gay men were interested in the idea that his murders might have been born of psychological isolation. During his first decade in prison Nilsen's mail bag became well-filled. Many letters were from loners who appeared to get some feeling of potency from proximity to a killer. Some were fixated; one teenage girl wrote almost daily. Her letters became increasingly disturbed, with suicide being discussed. Nilsen never replied.

Extraordinarily, one of Nilsen's previous victims also wrote. His name was Carl Stottor. He was 5ft 11in with long blond hair. When he composed his first letter he was 25, and four years had passed since Nilsen had tried to kill him. During this time, Stottor had suffered from depression and other post-traumatic conditions. Initially, he had thought the trial would bring closure, but it just threw up more questions. The lack of clarity over what exactly had happened, and why, continued to build up, causing ever-increasing emotional pressure.

On 16 February 1986, Stottor decided to ask prisoner B62006, directly, why he had tried to killed him. They exchanged letters over a period of months. I had heard about the correspondence from newspaper cuttings, and decided to track Stottor down. I met him one July afternoon in his flat on the south coast. The man who opened the door was frail, but welcoming. He was glad I had made it down to see him, as so many journalists had written about him without bothering to make the effort to visit. For several hours, and over several pots of tea, Stottor described what he now believes happened.

One Wednesday night, in the summer of 1983, Stottor found himself in the Black Cap in Camden, a gay pub that specialised in drag acts. Stottor was feeling depressed; he had recently run away from a violent boyfriend and still had carpet burns on his face from the last attack. While he drank his lager and lime, and contemplated his life, Stottor's gaze was drawn to Nilsen, who was chatting to a local at the bar.

After Nilsen's companion left, he came over and asked Stottor about his face. Stottor immediately noticed his eyes were big and brown. He seemed kind. Nilsen smiled and assured Stottor he was still pretty. Conversation flowed naturally. They soon discovered that both felt alienated from their families. It made Stottor feel Nilsen was someone he could confide in. At

closing time, Nilsen suggested that they return to his flat. In the cab back, they held hands.

Although the evening went well, there were still two things that happened before the attack that made Stottor feel uneasy. First, on the way back, Nilsen became furious with the taxi driver about the route, and paid him in the smallest change he had. The second occurred later in the flat. Stottor had been sitting cross-legged on the floor listening to Laurie Anderson's haunting 'O Superman'. He said it was his favourite song and Nilsen replied, 'You haven't even heard it til you've listened to it through these headphones.' As he listened, he became aware that Nilsen was standing behind him staring at his head.

These, however, were just uncomfortable moments in an otherwise pleasant evening. Stottor hardly cared about the state of the flat, and it didn't really seem that bad – 'shabby', but certainly not the worst he'd been in. The smell was a mixture of wet dog, stale dog food, cigarette smoke, damp and air fresheners. Stottor was much more interested in his new friend. They drank Bacardi and got drunk and, despite having told Nilsen that he was not up for any kind of sexual activity, they started to kiss and cuddle.

Stottor remembers the petting as normal, and tactile. Then the Bacardi started to take effect, and he was sick. They decided to go to bed, where they cuddled and fondled a little more. Instead of a blanket, Nilsen had an open sleeping bag. Nilsen drew Stottor's attention to the zip, which had come away from the padding, hanging loose like jagged rope. Nilsen warned him about getting caught in it.

An hour later, Stottor suddenly felt a sharp pain around his neck. Nilsen was strangling him with the zip he had been careful to tell him about. It later became apparent that Nilsen was using sufficient force to cause blood vessels in Stottor's eyes to pop. For several minutes, the young man instinctively fought against death, flailing around ineffectively. Nilsen then took him to the bathroom to finish him off. He ran the bath and then forced Stottor's head underwater. With his head held hard under the surface, Stottor could no longer resist the urge to breathe and started to inhale the water.

At this point, Stottor says he felt he was giving in to death. For Nilsen, this was the moment he began to feel his sex ritual going wrong. In his

manuscript, he says he stopped the attack because Stottor had now been ‘rendered passive’. The goal of the fantasy had been achieved and there was no need to go further. This seems highly implausible, if for no other reason than Stottor had already been extremely passive through alcohol and sleep before the strangulation had started.

Whatever the reason, once the ‘moment’ passed, everything changed. Nilsen says he then comforted Stottor, telling him about the zip and that he’d had to splash water on to him to bring him to. They cuddled some more, and in the morning he saw Stottor off.

Stottor told me that, after the initial ‘drowning’, he passed out and then regained consciousness underwater. He then passed out again. A while later, he says he experienced what might have been an out-of-body experience. He felt like he was floating in the room, looking down on a young, blond man laid out on the floor by an armchair. The man looked dead. Then a dog started licking his face. Another man was in the room. He was tall and dark. Realising the man by the chair was still alive, he approached him.

Stottor now believes he was finally revived the *following* morning, after he had been in the flat for 35 hours. Nilsen then walked him to the Tube. From here Stottor made his way to the Royal Free Hospital, where he told the doctor he had got caught up in a zip. The doctor shook his head and told him, ‘You’ve been strangled. Somebody may have tried to kill you.’ His state of shock deepened.

When I asked Stottor about the letters that he and Nilsen had exchanged, he seemed partly embarrassed and partly disgusted. He said he was still confused about what had happened. There had been times, he confessed, using one of his favourite lines, when he didn’t know if Nilsen was his ‘murderer or his saviour’. As there had only been two people in that room, he’d decided to ask the other one for an explanation.

Nilsen’s manuscript also talks about the correspondence. He says he was happy to write to Stottor, but mindful that too much contact might not necessarily be helpful. It seemed to him that Stottor might be attributing everything that made him unhappy about his life to that single attack. Nilsen says in *History of a Drowning Boy*: ‘I bore the man Carl Stottor no feelings of personal malice … my fateful and traumatic encounter with Stottor has to be viewed in proportion with this true light which places me

as just being one of a succession of competing forces in his greatly troubled life.'

In 1987, the letters between Nilsen and Stottor stopped. Stottor says the closest he ever got to an explanation as to why Nilsen had spared him was an unconvincing feeling that a 'thin strand of humanity passed between us'. He now believes the real reason he was spared was down to something infinitely more practical – Nilsen had decided he didn't have any more room for another dead body.

1989 was Nilsen's last full year in Wakefield. In *History of a Drowning Boy*, Nilsen tells his would-be readers he still had enough prison enemies to keep him in the newspapers, and sufficient friends to supply him with 'pot'. When contemplating his life in a marijuana haze, Nilsen felt he could see the whole of eternity stretched out in front of him. He describes the phenomenon in philosophical language. Life, he says, seemed short and insignificant. The experience was given a grandiose name: 'Nilsen's Second'.

Soft drugs were now an important and integral part of his life. He found they helped both his emotions and his ability to think. Instead of making him paranoid, as they frequently can, he says they would enable him to be tranquil and meditative. When he got high, he could think back and 'see' his victims in an almost peaceful state.

But, when off them, an opposite state of mind would, apparently, often bother him. He says his crimes might 'intrude' on to him with 'periodic reminders'. If someone's face put in mind a victim, for instance, he might become physically sick. Nilsen talks as though he liked to put his offending past into a mental box marked 'emotional breakdown' and doing so was easier when he was 'out of it'.

It wasn't just the drugs that helped Nilsen cope with his past. The whole atmosphere of prison helped. There were people everywhere to whom Nilsen could compare himself and not come off so badly. On his wing was Archibald Hall, a serial killer butler who, in old age, had become an avuncular figure. And, for a while, Nilsen found himself locked up with the 'country's most violent prisoner', the man who had changed his name to that of the actor Charles Bronson, whose violent assaults on staff had turned

an 11-year sentence into seemingly indeterminate incarceration. Nilsen marvelled at his physique and spirit.

Much more terrible than Hall or Bronson was Ted Paisnel. For 11 years, Paisnel had roamed the island of Jersey at night, dressed in rubber and chains, raping women and children. Now he seemed just an ordinary bloke. In fact, the most incredible thing about him – that his wife had stood by him all this time – seemed almost reasonable.

Towards the end of the year, Nilsen experienced the last 'romantic' relationship he would have, or at least talk about, in prison. It was a sex-offender whom we'll call Peter Chapple. He was 34 and good looking, although emotionally stunted. Chapple was serving a sentence for having sex with teenage boys. Before talking about their relationship, Nilsen makes some remarks about Chapple's character that are revealing both about his ability to judge others and also how he saw himself at the time. Nilsen says that Chapple would prefer to divert himself in activities like maths and computers than take part in the 'risky world of adult emotions'. Nilsen, with his own preference for books, saw himself as emotionally superior.

Even though Chapple was emotionally immature, he was still one of the most powerful personalities on his landing. Initially, Nilsen's attraction to someone with such a strong character might seem odd. The way he had chosen his victims had indicated, after all, that, typically, he would seek out those with weaker wills for company. In this instance, one reason for the attraction, other than looks, soon becomes apparent. Nilsen was drawn to the fact that Chapple was an instinctive musician. This was a skill Nilsen greatly coveted. For his 43rd birthday, Brian Masters had bought Nilsen the cheap Casio electronic keyboard he'd asked for. Now he wanted to learn to play it.

After hearing Chapple demonstrate how it worked, Nilsen immediately decided they should write a musical together. He would be the wordsmith and Chapple the composer. Nilsen had taken charge of the relationship, and also shown his potential partner what a creative force he was. The plans stalled a week later. After two sessions trying to come up with musical ideas, it became apparent that Chapple couldn't compose. Nilsen emphasises that he was still desperate to do *something* creative. He proposed putting on a comedy revue. No one, however, wanted to be in it.

Undeterred, Nilsen started submitting poetry for prison magazines, and composing on his keyboard. He tells us that he had his eyes on the prestigious Koestler Awards for artistic achievement in prison. But whereas Nilsen's plays and art were of a good amateur standard, the quality of his music couldn't match his desire to produce it.

In 1990, Nilsen was transferred to Full Sutton Prison, a relatively new maximum-security facility in Yorkshire. Many prisoners objected to his presence. Nilsen says in *History of a Drowning Boy* that, when he arrived, he was made to feel about as welcome as a 'dead pig in a synagogue'. He describes violence, too. One night, two hooded men burst into his cell with a bowl of boiling water into which sugar had been dissolved to make it boil hotter. He picked up the only object to hand, a battery for his keyboard, and threw it in their direction. Being unco-ordinated, it hit the wall above them. Still, it made them drop the water.

The next day, he was transferred to the segregation unit. He spent virtually the whole summer there. Afterwards, he was told he was going to be part of the trial for the Vulnerable Prisoner Unit scheme. VPUs were being set up in various prisons across the country to protect prisoners who might become a target from others, such as terrorists and policemen. In practice, the VPUs were mainly used for sex-offenders; in Nilsen's words, 'ghettos for nonces'. He didn't enjoy the company he was now keeping. The prisoners on the VPU were a concentration of the facility's least popular inmates. As such, it isn't hard to believe some of his allegations. Despite being segregated, Nilsen says at mealtimes he saw human faeces in the custard, and razors in the pies.

The following year (1991), he was moved to the VPU in Albany on the Isle of Wight. It was a 1960s-built prison that later specialised almost entirely in 'vulnerable prisoners'. The regime was austere – there was no cell association, and evening association in the common room was by rota. Nilsen was sent to work in a wood mill, a far cry from the education, drama and art he enjoyed. This was labour and damn hard. If Nilsen had once expressed a desire to suffer to atone for his crimes, he didn't like the reality of the wood mill one bit. Constant arguments with the guards and instructors earned him spells in the segregation unit. As in Brixton, he would refer to it as 'the punishment block'.

While Nilsen was settling into life in the VPU, the prison reformer Lord Longford asked if he might start visiting. Longford sought to bring redemption. He was a devout Roman Catholic who fearlessly sought out the most unpleasant cases to whom he chose to bring his message. In particular, Longford had become famous for visiting the Moors murderer Myra Hindley. It was his belief that she should be granted parole on the grounds of her religious conversion.

As much as Longford preached forgiveness, his religious beliefs also made him highly intolerant of homosexual practices. But despite this, Nilsen's accounts of Longford are warm. He is so pleased to have been the recipient of so much attention he initially sets Longford's religious beliefs aside. Eventually, though, Nilsen found those beliefs to be incompatible with his own, and he says he amicably asked him not to come any more. The peer is characterised as 'saintly', but with a body and face which looked like they'd 'been pickled in alcohol'. For his part, Lord Longford's diaries describe Nilsen as aloof and strange, but admirable in how he busied himself with positive and constructive hobbies. Longford was also struck by Nilsen's odd sense of humour, remembering one comment by Nilsen to him one day: 'You might have met the queen, but I know lots of queens.'

Nilsen's view on Longford was, no doubt, positively affected by the latter's defence of Nilsen's intrinsic 'humanity' in a newspaper interview with Brian Masters. The way Nilsen tells the story, Masters had again been speaking about him in those terms he liked the least – as some kind of demon – and Longford had replied by saying that he believed that everyone had a human soul.

Although Masters was still visiting Nilsen, privately Nilsen was feeling increasingly resentful towards him. The bitter tone of the manuscript suddenly changes, however, when Nilsen describes hearing of a street attack on Masters. Nilsen wants the reader to feel, despite everything, he still perceives Masters as a fundamentally kind man. He is appalled, he says, that the horrible attack might be connected with anything he could have said or done. It wasn't – in fact, it was a simple mugging.

But Nilsen now was no longer reliant on Masters as the sole constant in his life. He had just 'met' the best friend he was ever to have, Jonny Marling, details of whose identity have here been changed. He was of medium height, dark-haired and lived a normal, suburban life. Marling had

obtained Nilsen's address from the Prison Service, having first become fascinated by the story he read in *Killing for Company*. In response to Marling's open and enquiring letters of introduction, Nilsen decided to try to make their friendship work. The serial killer and the suburban family man exchanged a flurry of letters, often running to both sides of seven or eight pieces of paper.

The subject of one of the first was what to make of the American psychiatrist, Walter Powlowski, who, in May 1992, asked Nilsen to write a 'sexual history' to assist him in a study on serial killers. This project soon fizzled out. However, in July, a British sociologist asked for a similar essay. Nilsen started … and kept writing. That summer, he remembers in *History of a Drowning Boy* that he was also approached by a producer from Central TV who wanted to interview him. They asked him if he had written anything. He had. The first draft of his 'writings' was typed with such force that the keys almost went through the paper. It opens with: 'This is a narrative compilation including what I believe to be the salient features of my sexual history.'

His sex life, proper, began as he drifted through his late twenties in London.

6

ADRIFT IN LONDON

'The psychological struggles and rages had festered for years.'
DENNIS NILSEN, IN A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR

One scene dominates the many 'real-crime 'documentaries that have been made about Dennis Nilsen: Nilsen and another man are pictured enjoying last drinks in a smoky bar in London's West End. It's the late 1970s. The street outside is wet and Piccadilly's neon lights reflect in the puddles. Inside, we see a close-up shot of Nilsen's rum and Coke. The imagery serves to illustrate how Dennis Nilsen's twenties and early thirties were dominated by alcohol and casual liaisons.

A similar picture emerges in one chapter of Brian Master's book, *Killing for Company*. It is called 'Police and Civil Service'. Here, however, the depiction is partly created by use of Nilsen's own accounts. His contributions emphasise his sensitivity to the superficiality of the gay scene. These are described as his 'lonely years' where 'everything was transitory. His words had a bizarre effect on some who read these passages.

After publication of *Killing for Company*, the number of men and women who wrote to Nilsen steadily rose. These letters now exist in a private crime archive where I was invited to view them. Most were from highly emotional, young women. One correspondent opened with the words 'I am not a crank …' and another reassured Nilsen with the words 'it's not very nice feeling lonely and different'. There were also a few who seemed to be so taken with the idea that a sensitive young gay man could find himself so totally estranged from society they appeared to overlook what he had actually done. A fair few young men even attached photographs of themselves.

Many of these people were, probably, themselves emotionally disturbed. Yet that, in itself, doesn't explain why Nilsen's life story touched such a chord. It seems it was the manner in which he had *described* his loneliness

that had the effect. The elegant way he wrote – or possibly plagiarised other's words – made people feel his sentiments were authentic. 'Anonymous sex,' he said in *Killing for Company*, 'only deepens one's sense of loneliness and solves nothing. It's like compulsive gambling. Sex in a natural place is like the signature at the end of a letter. Written on its own, it's less than nothing. Signatures are easy to sign, good letters far more difficult.'

It wasn't just sad, lonely individuals who were fascinated with Nilsen's story. In 1988, ITV's *South Bank Show* aired a film of a 'modern ballet' called *Dead Dreams of Monochrome Men*. The press release said the dance was loosely based on Nilsen's life and explored 'interwoven notions of loneliness desire and trust', and that 'society's homophobia often results in tragic consequences'. Almost a decade later, a 'cult' gay author, P-P Hartnett, would publish a book entitled *Call Me*, in which he explored the loneliness of those who exploit contact adverts in search of transitory affection. Hartnett corresponded with Nilsen while he wrote it, inviting the killer to comment on the emotional content.

Later, Hartnett even helped with the first edit of *History of a Drowning Boy*. In long hand-written letters, Nilsen would give detailed explanations of how he felt the work should be completed. That handwriting is instantly recognisable. It is tight, slanted and the pen is pushed so hard it almost goes through the paper. His handwriting closely matches characteristics the Israeli graphologist Anna Koren has observed in 'schizoid murderers': angularity, pressure, tension and a tendency to cover the entire page. Schizoid personalities are usually considered to be emotionally cut off, often very sensitive and sometimes exhibit a rich, vivid imagination. Much the same could be said of the better prose Nilsen used to describe life in the late 1970s.

On 7 November 1972, Dennis Nilsen, then 27, caught the train from Aberdeen to Edinburgh and changed on to the London express. He was full of optimism as he looked out of the window from the smoking car.

As he travelled south, Nilsen reflected on the two-month break he had just spent in Strichen. There had been an unpleasant incident at his brother Olav's house. The film *Victim*, which had themes of homosexuality and blackmail, was being shown on the TV. Olav had taken every opportunity to

direct barbed comments about ‘poofs’ and ‘queers’ towards his younger brother who sat there red-faced and fuming. As he looked out of the train window, he still felt enraged.

Then, during the rest of that long trip he took stock of how things had gone for him. It pleased him that many of those he had known seemed to have reached their plateau, whereas he felt he was moving on. But, for the most part, the Broch just made him feel sad. He remembered walking around his childhood haunts, starting with the bleak, bare Mormond Hill. Then he went to the river where old Mr Ironside had died. Later, he walked to the grave of Brian Strachen, who had been killed in a motorbike accident. The grave of his grandfather Andrew Whyte was just across the way. As he looked around him, he must have been struck by the ephemeral nature of human life. He felt it was exactly the right time for him to go to where he might have a future.

Nilsen’s first task on arriving at King’s Cross was to install himself in temporary accommodation. He found a room in a hostel and the next morning contacted the army career advice service. At its south London offices, the careers officer suggested he might be suited to a role as a prison officer or policeman. The idea of being a prison officer was an instant turn off.

He then contacted the police careers service in Victoria Street. By the end of the week, he was walking through the door at the recruiting office at Harrow Road. While his drinking may well have exerted its toll on his mental health, physically he was in good shape. He walked through the medical, and the Met Police said they were happy to take his army certificates in lieu of O-levels. Everything in his written test and interview indicated he was suitable.

By December 1972, Dennis Nilsen was living in a single room in the Metropolitan Police training school at Hendon Police College, near Colindale, a north London suburb that sits at the foot of the M1. The once attractive Georgian-style building was beginning to show its age and would soon be knocked down and replaced by a purpose-built block. Still, if the old buildings were decaying, some felt they had collegiate charm.

Life as a probationary police officer started with a 16-week induction course. For almost four months, Nilsen was taught the basics of being a constable. On theoretical side, there was government, law, powers of arrest,

traffic regulations, police regulations and court procedure. Even more important was the practical instruction: how to investigate; the basics of first aid; how to subdue criminals; and, of course, how to be courteous with the public.

Nilsen wrote to his mother telling her all about his exciting new life. Betty Scott was not only proud but immensely relieved. She had been worried about how unsettled Dennis had seemed during his visit. Olav told her what had happened at his house and Betty had heard how one night Dennis had got into an argument with some local boys in the Station Hotel. It had ended with him being pushed over and humiliated. She had been concerned Dennis might have been on the slide. But now he was going to be a policeman, so surely that would see him back on track.

It may well have done, if there had been other positive influences. But in the end, joining the police did nothing to help wean Nilsen off his increasing dependence on bizarre masturbation fantasies. The force just supplied a new set of people from whom he felt alienated, which, in turn, left him able to drift further into his secret life. Partly, the problem came from the fact the environment was still too macho. But it was also because Nilsen's sexual thoughts were, again, directed at colleagues. This manifested itself physically in swimming lessons that started in the first week at Hendon.

Being able to swim was a requirement of the job. But Nilsen was utterly afraid of water. In order not to draw attention to himself, he claimed to be a 'weak swimmer'. Like others in his position, he was put down for lessons until he was ready for the life-saving classes. Later, these would involve towing a colleague, who would pretend to be unconscious, to the side of the pool. The fact the bodies were so inert played straight into Nilsen's specific sexual fixation. He would invariably become physically aroused, and often needed to find excuses to stay in the water until he had calmed down.

Such episodes were an early sign he was going to have as much difficulty settling in here as in the Army. This time, however, he was less bothered. Now there was a whole city of people out there for him to meet. All he had to do was find the right ones, and soon he found out where to start looking.

Nilsen's induction into gay London life began, ironically, in a 'girlie' bar. One evening, in the Section House, Nilsen found himself falling in with a group of young probationers who had decided to go off on an adventure in Soho. In Windmill Street, one young police cadet decided to show off by using his warrant card to get them all into a strip club. Nilsen, uninterested in the girls inside, soon made an excuse to leave. In the street outside, he was convinced he saw Sir John Gielgud talking to a young guardsman. Nilsen mentioned it to his colleagues, along with the fact that he was convinced that many guardsmen were gay.

Nilsen records in *History of a Drowning Boy* that the next day, no doubt in response, the Training Officer giving the following address: 'You can spot a queer a mile off because they all wear white polo-necked sweaters, red corduroy trousers and Hush Puppies, and they hang about in Earls Court.' That evening, Nilsen says he took a Tube train 'and checked the [Earls Court] High Street, for an "interesting" pub'. He describes a smoky, dark establishment with frosted windows:

> *In one bar there were lots of men in leather pants, jackets and caps and they were of all ages ranging from young men to proto geriatrics with white, short hair. A lot of them seemed to opt for the straight 'Kojak'.*
>
> *I transferred myself to the bigger bar which was crowded out. I knew instantly that it was a gay bar because everyone looked you up and down and passed on the appropriate comments to one another. 'Oh, look at her, nice dish (arse) ... Do you think she's butch or bitch?' etc.*
>
> *It was a bit unsettling the first time and I didn't know what to expect or what to do. I was not in on the special language of the thriving gay subculture. What I didn't know was body language and, after I fortified myself with a couple of stiff drinks, I was chatting to a slim, young man who was eyeing me up.'*

By 10.00 in the evening, Nilsen found himself being invited by the young man back for a coffee at his, only a few blocks away. The flat was up a long flight of stairs and, at the top, he was surprised to find a wife and baby in the kitchen. The man put his finger to his mouth and hushed Nilsen,

motioning that they should tip-toe to the spare room. But the short, sturdy woman had seen them and chased them out. Undeterred, Nilsen hailed a cab and told the man he was going to come back to *his* place. The 16-week course at the Police Training College was almost over, and he was sure that he could get away with having a 'drunken friend' crash over in his small room. He propped a chair up against the door to make sure no one could get in and, in the morning, he got up extra early to sneak the man out.

Instead of feeling more comfortable about sex, however, such encounters seemed to make Nilsen more aware of how society only just tolerated homosexuality. In his essay 'The Psychograph', Nilsen describes the attitudes he'd become used to: 'In the military, as in the country as a whole, homosexuality was considered to be a serious criminal offence [it was legalised in 1967]. In the Judeo-Christian Western world, the idea of "unnatural sexual practices" remained an unspeakable vice performed between moral degenerates. Genuine expressive love between two consenting males was dismissed with curt terms such as "buggery", "sodomy" or "indecency".'

The cumulative effect of such attitudes – from Fraserburgh, the Army and the police – had left him with a very significant residue of guilt. The result was that when he did start meeting other gay men, rather than looking for a long-term partner, he was invariably attracted to other people whose primary objective was simple, physical gratification. It was lonely, but at least easy to keep separate from his work life.

In the spring of 1973, Nilsen passed the initial set of police exams with a 'high' mark. He was then posted as a probationary officer to Willesden Green near Wembley. As a probationary constable, Nilsen was required to learn on the job. He would go out on the 'beat', both in a pair and, later, alone. Like many of Nilsen's stomping grounds in North London, his 'patch' of Willesden Green was a shabby suburb. The tree-lined avenues contained substantial Edwardian and Victorian houses, which, on closer inspection, turned out to have been split into flats for the poor, often Irish immigrant, community.

Nilsen was given a mentor called Peter Wellstead, who believed young probationers would benefit from experiencing the uglier aspects of policing right from the outset. He started with the morgue. Before proceeding into

the actual mortuary, the probationers were given a briefing in the corridor. They were then let in three at a time.

Nilsen wasn't bothered. He was confident he had seen enough exploded bodies in Aden to be able to detach himself. Inside the room, things were every bit as grisly as they had been warned. There were metal trolleys with dead bodies cut open from the neck to the navel. The back of the heads were sawn open, exposing grey folds of brain matter. The other trainee needed to be sick; Nilsen was unaffected.

Something else happened in that room, however, to make Nilsen realise quite how disturbed his sexuality had become. On one slab was a 12-year-old girl. Smooth, slim and blonde, Nilsen thought how she looked like a little boy. As she was being wheeled around, her dead hand flopped out next to the assistant's, an old man with a slight hunchback. Nilsen became aroused, and looked away. But he couldn't stop imagining the old assistant abusing the unblemished 'passive' body.

That night, he went out again to the gay pubs of Earls Court, a west-central London area also known for its Australian population. He was beginning to appreciate the freedom he now enjoyed. The following night, he again went to the pub; and then the night after that. Frequenting gay bars, such as the Coleherne, became his main method of looking for pick-ups. He found the idea of cruising public toilets and cinemas seedy and disgusting. Although extreme, his actual sex life was, by the standards of many on the gay scene, reserved. As we've already seen, according to one of his accounts, he claims not to have experienced penetrative sex until the age of 27.

When it finally happened, it was not from one of his trips to the gay bars – it was an opportunistic rape. The victim was a teenage boy whom Nilsen had met during a social visit to a gay drop-in centre run by a Church of England curate. On certain evenings, a small hall would become a place for advice and warm drinks for youngsters, many of whom were runaways. Nilsen invited one Scottish boy out to the pub. As they got more and more drunk, Nilsen realised he had nowhere to go, so he asked him if he'd like to spend the night in a cheap hotel. En route, he bought some rum.

Back in the hotel, the youth passed out on one of the two single beds. For the second time, Nilsen saw the opportunity for having a sexual encounter with an unconscious male body. 'I lifted him up into my arms

and just stood there for a moment savouring the power of the situation. I looked down at his helpless, vulnerable nudity dangling in my arms,' he says. He then pulled the boy's trousers down and started to bugger him in his sleep. In the morning, everything was normal. The boy went on his way, and Nilsen remembered it as a thrilling encounter.

Nilsen presents this story as part of his explanation of how he developed a deep 'psycho-sexual' need. To understand his logic, one must first accept his understanding of the effect of a series of traumas in his life: his dysfunctional childhood had left him feeling inadequate; this turned his sexuality in on itself, forcing him to become reliant on fantasies. And experiences in the London gay scene, being anonymous and depersonalised, easily became extensions of this destructive, internal world.

Although Nilsen talks about psycho-sexual fantasy 'needs', in fact, they read like something more psychologically straightforward: a catalogue of perversions whose pull was irresistible. And despite anything he might say about having problems controlling his thoughts, Nilsen cannot give any persuasive reasons for acting on them. Nilsen's development of normal empathy clearly seems to have stalled in early childhood. He bridles at any such suggestions. His letters are full of indignant mentions of the word. Nilsen seems fascinated by the idea of empathy but never able to grasp the real meaning.

Commenting on a report compiled for a probation hearing, for instance, he says, 'I have always had deep empathy with my victims. I know both the pain of their lives and the degree of loss caused by those who loved them.' Empathy didn't feature as a natural part of the actual attacks, he says, because in those instances he was acting out of a compulsion, not out of free will. He does admit he had to desensitise himself when he came to destroy the bodies. Nilsen denies, however, that he ever desensitised himself any more than, for instance, people who work for the ambulance service or in morgues.

We have seen, by now, abundant evidence of Nilsen's tendency to desensitise, compartmentalise and separate aspects of his world on an almost permanent basis. From the story of the rape, for example, he moves easily on to other subjects. He recalls a series of films he had enjoyed watching, and says that he particularly admired Stanley Kubrick. From films he moves on to art and his favourite painting – Gericault's *The Raft of*

Medusa. And then he goes straight back to sex and death. He tells us the painting features an image of an old man with a dead, naked boy on his lap. He would use that scene in his fantasies.

By mid-1973, death had now become a fixed theme in Nilsen's sex fantasies. Although he didn't have a mirror, he would play new variations on old themes in his head before going to sleep. In one, the ugly old man was replaced by a handsome, powerful, well-muscled black man. The passive character was now an emaciated, teenage junkie, dead from an overdose.

Nilsen attempts several explanations of what he calls the 'psychological conundrums' of his fantasy life. 'In sexual intercourse,' he tells us in 'The Psychograph', 'the magic number is two.' Being a loner, he felt this was beyond him. So his subconscious responded by splitting itself into two sexual elements. These two 'types' in his sexual imagination would always correspond to the old man and the youth, with the man active and the boy totally passive. 'This passivity,' Nilsen says, 'ranged from being drunk, drugged, asleep, comatose or dead.'

Nilsen's mind was the 'curator' of both parts. The sexual thrill – or in his terms 'frissive excitement' – came from the combination of extreme passivity and absolute power. He would typically imagine himself in one role or the other, but feels at a deeper level he was always both. 'The goal,' Nilsen says, 'was never to dwell in unreality but to coax the need out of its closet into the real functioning world.' But this never happened. Instead, he says, his fantasies or 'Fortress Fantasy Psychograph', only brought him short term 'medicinal' value because his long-term 'entrenchment' resulted in 'augmenting his isolation'. The more he did it, the more he 'came to depend on it for nourishment'. In simpler words, the fantasies only ever made things worse.

The more Nilsen withdrew into his world, the less impression he made on his colleagues. There were suspicions about his sexuality, but otherwise he was seen as a competent loner. Still, there was something about him that seems to have given at least one other colleague an uneasy feeling.

Journalist John Lisners in his book *House of Horrors* tells a story that when news got out about a multiple murderer being found in North London, before Nilsen's name had been released, a former colleague was heard

saying, ‘If it’s true he’s an ex-copper, my money’s on it being Dennis Nilsen.’

Nilsen was evidently becoming increasingly estranged from his colleagues. It seems he was now beginning to see himself as an outsider figure, siding with anti-establishment heroes he would read about. ‘The more I got to know my colleagues,’ he writes, ‘The more I thought I might be in the wrong line of work. Police and villains looked much the same.’ He shirked patrolling for men engaged in ‘indecent acts’. If he saw two young men parked up in a quiet road, he crossed over. What were they doing, other than trying to connect with other human beings, he thought. As for himself, he was becoming increasingly convinced of the emotional limitations of promiscuity.

Nilsen’s manuscript is, however, less bleak on this period of his life than he was later in his confessions to Brian Masters. Ten years on, in 1983, Nilsen observed in *Killing for Company*, ‘I was left with an endless search through the soul-destroying pub scene and its resulting one-night stands … passing faces and bodies, the unfulfilled tokens of an empty life. A house is not a home and sex is not a relationship. We would only lend each other our bodies in a vain search for inner peace.’

But now, he describes the summer of 1973 in brighter terms. That June, Nilsen met a young man in the William IV in Hampstead, one of London’s greenest and most sophisticated areas. Unlike the Coleherne, the ‘Willy’ was not an exclusively gay pub. But with its proximity to the cruising ground of Hampstead Heath, it took on that quality at many times during the week. The man in question – whom we’ll call Derek – had a mane of androgynous, long blond hair and looked like a glam-rocker.

They went back together to Nilsen’s room at the Police Section House which, in all the drunken excitement, Derek had assumed was a hostel. Again, with a chair pressed up against the door for privacy, the pair engaged in sexual activity that Nilsen rated as one of the most enjoyable sex experiences of his life. When Derek awoke, Nilsen was putting on his uniform. ‘Is this the police station?’ asked Derek.

Nilsen replied with a flirtatious joke about ‘taking down his particulars’.

As he walked out of the Section House, the sergeant stared across at him. Derek’s appearance suggested to Nilsen’s senior officer that he was not the sort of man who should have been ‘passing through’ at that time of the

morning. Nilsen explained his presence by saying that he had just sold the young man a fish tank. He then walked Derek down to the Tube and, just to show what rebellious spirits they were, they kissed full on the mouth just before the doors closed. Nilsen still had his policeman's hat on. He describes the incident triumphantly.

Derek proved to be just another young man looking for sexual adventure. Nilsen, however, was now looking for someone to be close to. The two met on a number of further occasions, but it soon became clear to Nilsen that Derek was really interested in sleeping around to make him feel better about himself. The last time Nilsen saw him was in 1975. On that occasion, Derek asked if he could 'borrow' money. The encounter left Nilsen with more than a bad taste in his mouth – he discovered he'd contracted gonorrhea.

At the end of 1973, at the age of 27, Nilsen decided to go no further with the police. A rumour exists that he was informally asked not to continue after a colleague reported him for masturbating in the morgue, but there isn't much evidence to support the claim. Nilsen says he just felt he was in the wrong business. He wanted to have fun, but had found the police force to have been full of bigots. He now just wanted to be a normal citizen.

During the winter of 1973-74, the UK was in the midst of a depression. The pop group Slade might have been celebrating their huge hit, 'Merry Xmas Everybody', but elsewhere an oil crisis had just ended and the three-day week was about to start.

Nilsen, however, was feeling optimistic. Just before Christmas, he moved into 9 Manstone Road, a sub-let bedsit in a Victorian house just off Cricklewood Broadway (another mixed suburb with a large Irish immigrant community). Despite Nilsen's initial sense of hopefulness, the festive period soon became lonely. His only company came from occasional trysts in bars. He wrote to his mother as he did periodically throughout the year, but had no other contact with his family. There were no friends to give him support, or to give him an injection of normality or common sense.

In the first week of January, the Labour Exchange found Nilsen a job as a security guard for the Department of the Environment. Compared to the police, it was straightforward. Mainly, it just involved patrolling various government buildings in different parts of town. In one office in the Shell

building, next to Waterloo, he found a book on toxicology. Two photographs brought home to Nilsen his increasing sexual interest in dead bodies. One was an image of a boy who had died of drowning; the other was a colour photo of a boy with rigor mortis. By a trick of the light, his flesh tones suggested that he was still alive. That photograph made Nilsen realise that he could be 'frantically aroused' by the idea of someone being at the 'dividing line between life and death'. He contemplated stealing the book. As he writes about this, his prose becomes even more direct and confessional.

Another story from this period also rings true, even though it is utterly bizarre. It finds Nilsen trying to act out his 'old man fantasy' with a dead gorilla. It was in the warehouse of the Natural History Museum, and the gorilla was stuffed. Nilsen was again working as a security guard. He was patrolling one night when he came across the animal, which, with its false eyes, looked alive to him. More importantly to Nilsen, the dead primate looked 'powerful'.

Nilsen had recently dyed his hair blonde, and thought he looked young, Aryan and pretty. The contrast between himself and the gorilla provided just the frisson he enjoyed. Looking at the gorilla, Nilsen says his heart beat harder and harder until he could no longer resist the urge to strip off. He placed the gorilla's hand on his naked flesh. Having no mirror, he imagined he was looking down on the scene, and the gorilla was about to carry him off. But when he looked down, he found that the gorilla only had a 'pathetic little stump' for a penis. His arousal subsided, and he put his clothes back on.

With his new blond haircut, Nilsen says he now particularly enjoyed admiring himself when masturbating. When old men in bars eyed him up, however, it made him furiously angry. Nilsen's new look also drew the attention of his neighbours. Eventually, other tenants complained about him bringing men back. Entertaining was forbidden and Nilsen was given a warning. He took this as a sign he was at another crossroads in his life. Night was a time for being gay, he felt, and not for masturbating with gorillas. He would find a new flat and a new job and live his life in London to the full.

The next few months were no happier though. Nilsen resigned from his security guard job, and then with £8 he got by selling his General Service

medal he set himself up in another bedsit, this time in a detached Edwardian house in nearby 80 Teignmouth Road. 'Like Dickens' Mr Micawber', he said, he felt that some job or other was bound to turn up. He went down to the Labour Exchange (later the Job Centre) in Denmark Street in the heart of the West End. 'They didn't couldn't find me a job, or give me money … but they did give me a job. Working for them,' Nilsen writes.

Despite nestling among guitar shops, the employment centre dealt with the low-paid jobs for the restaurants in nearby Soho. Nilsen's experience in catering made him a good fit. Initially, he was frustrated not to be put on front-line duty interviewing clients – instead, he was relegated to answering phones – but he still found the work environment better than anything he had previously experienced. It was a much more accepting atmosphere than the police or Army. One colleague called him Des, and from that day the name stuck. 'Des' became convinced some other colleagues were closet homosexuals. He also liked the way that some of the women in the office guessed he might be gay. If asked, he would confirm it quietly with a smile.

With a regular job and a decent roof over his head, life didn't seem so bad. In Nilsen's internal 'film' he saw himself as the leading man in a picaresque, sexual adventure. One night he woke up in the bed of an aristocrat's butler; on another, it was a small-time Australian soap actor. But by the summer of 1975, however, another 'incident' occurred. One afternoon, Nilsen says in his autobiography that he met a 17-year-old called David Painter at the Job Centre where he had been looking for work. Later, Nilsen, bumped into him in the street. Nilsen was probably aware by this stage that Painter had mental problems of some sort, and knew that there'd be the risk of trouble if they went back to his flat. But Nilsen refuses to admit he did anything wrong that night, other than try to seduce someone who was particularly vulnerable:

> *Risk became hard fact when I picked up a 17-year-old 'disturbed' teenager named David Painter … I don't think he had an experienced alcohol intake. We watched TV at my room at 80 Teignmouth Road, watched a reel of test film I had shot of London and had a few Martinis. He knew he was sleeping with me in the single bed and he entered it as naked as did I … (I) just put my arm around his body. To my utter amazement he threw a screaming fit … running around the*

house … 'Oh God,' I said to myself, 'a nutter!' … later, I did my best to calm him down but he barged into a glass partition, in front of other tenant witnesses in the house.

Nilsen felt he had no option but call the police himself. Painter was taken to hospital where he claimed that Nilsen had tried to assault him sexually. And so the civil servant was brought in … to his old police station, Willesden Green. He was questioned and then put in the cells for the night. In the morning, Painter and his parents decided not to press charges and Nilsen was released. The incident was logged. These were the days of manual typewriters and index cards and there was no easy way of recording incidents that could then be easily linked to those of a similar nature.

On the Monday morning, Nilsen didn't mention the incident. No one in the office ever did or ever would have any reason to guess that their colleague's home life was anything other than humdrum and lonely. His work was administerial, and, for the most part, he got on with it quietly. Sometimes, in conversation, however, he would vehemently put forward his opinion on every aspect of events in the news. He says he was now 'ensconced in the noisy, empty, jungle/desert of the Metropolis'. Elsewhere, he described the empty world of the bedsitter as 'devoid of any supportive community of neighbours', a 'lifestyle of underground trains and clerical work'.

Nilsen disliked his superiors. He felt they disapproved both of his sexuality and trade union activities. But, among his co-workers, there were still plenty who shared Nilsen's socialist ideals. Occasionally, they would ask Nilsen for a drink after work. He may have been eccentric and opinionated, some thought, but maybe he just needed some encouragement? Nilsen would, as often as not, join them, but invariably he would soon become unsettled and leave early, in favour of the gay bars. Of those bars, he says they 'left me with a kind of forlorn sadness which came from a long, frustrated run of "one-night stands" with the strangers bent on promiscuity rather than the permanent relationship of my aspiration. I became trapped in a treadmill of work, drink and isolation.'

In the summer of 1975, at the age of 29, Nilsen finally found himself in an approximation of a domestic relationship. It began with a letter telling him

his father had died. Olav Nilsen had ended his days as the manager of a fish canning factory in Ghana. He was on his fourth wife and had died of a heart-attack. The letter informed him that Olav's surname wasn't actually Nilsen, but Moksheim. Apparently, Dennis also had half-brothers and sisters he'd never heard of.

Olav Moksheim left Dennis £1,400. It was very welcome and accelerated his desire for a domestic life. Now that he had some money behind him, Nilsen decided he wouldn't just let life happen. That weekend, Nilsen got chatting to David Gallichan in the Champion pub in Bayswater. Gallichan was 18, approximately 5ft 9in, skinny and blond with a friendly, round face. Dennis impressed the youngster by telling him he used to be a soldier. Gallichan had come up from Weston-super-Mare in search of the bright lights and was easily impressed. Small and exceptionally effeminate, with what Nilsen called 'the mentality of a 15-year-old', Gallichan easily succumbed to the older man's suggestion that they set up home together.

After just one night in 80 Teignmouth Road, the pair went flat-hunting. The result was finding 195 Melrose Avenue, a substantial Victorian-conversion garden flat on the other side of Cricklewood and about a hundred yards from Gladstone Park. It was a good-sized, if poorly presented, semi-detached property, extended at the back. Upstairs were two small flats and, downstairs, two larger ones. Nilsen and Gallichan's flat was the rearmost of the ground-floor apartments. They had two rooms, a bathroom and a small kitchen. The living room (in which they also sometimes slept) had French windows to the rear and the kitchen was next to it. The bedroom had a bunk bed that Nilsen eventually converted to be just a top platform.

Nilsen decided to splash some of his inheritance money on home comforts, but first he wanted to make a project of the garden. The two of them spent an entire week doing it up. Gallichan would take the day shift while Nilsen was at work. In the evenings and weekends, Nilsen took over.

After all this work, he felt it only fair that they were granted sole access. He wrote a letter to the agent, Leon Roberts of Ellis and Co, explaining how only their French windows had direct access and only they seemed to care. He told him all about the stone paving he had put down, and the plum trees he had planted. It seemed reasonable, and Roberts signed the letter without coming down to inspect. Months later, Roberts dropped in to see the garden

he had heard so much about. It struck him as the most bizarre outside space he had ever seen, with a series of mini fenced-off sections, and strange features.

Nilsen had also been careful to make sure animals were allowed. He brought his budgie, Hamish, over from Teignmouth Road, and bought a fish pond from a pet shop in Willesden. From another pet shop the two of them picked out a black-and-white mongrel puppy. Nilsen says he named her Bleep because she made a bleeping noise when they first brought her home. Later, the couple picked up a stray kitten named Deedee, standing for Des and David.

Next, they started to decorate. Gallichan painted the walls and Nilsen bought paintings and armchairs. This should have been a happy time – it was far from it. Some of Nilsen's Super 8 film footage of them still exists and it makes for extremely disturbing viewing. Nilsen is relentlessly angry. Sometimes there's a reason, such as when some roof plaster fell down, but more often than not it seems driven by an inner rage. Invariably, Gallichan bears the brunt of all this anger. We see 'Twinkle' – Nilsen's nickname for him – being told he isn't holding the camera right or that he's looking like 'a right poof'. Gallichan simply smiles back.

At least Nilsen was able to provide for him. But despite luxuries like a quality stereo and a decent television, the differences in their characters meant they rarely shared them. Gallichan didn't like classical music or progressive rock; classic films bored him, too. Sexually, too, Gallichan became more interested in other men he would meet in town. He told a reporter that Nilsen wasn't very good at or interested in sex.

Nilsen complained that Gallichan was too hairy, bony and too thin. He may well have added 'too real'. After years of reflection, Nilsen also seems to have been aware of this: 'I viewed my surroundings through an oblong, movie format. That's probably why I was never able to get very close to people because my attraction was for ideal, theoretical people who presented a simplistic relationship free from the problems and complexities of real people. Despite living in close proximity to David Gallichan for 18 months, I didn't really know him at all.'

Nilsen couldn't stop 'Twink' sloping off to the bars of Soho. Still, if they were no longer lovers, they were still a household. On one occasion when Nilsen's half-brother Andrew was in town, Des was pleased to be able to

invite him over to ‘their’ house. At the Job Centre Christmas party in 1975, Des showed Twinkle off as his ‘companion’, thereby eliminating any doubts over his sexuality. But, at home, they avoided each other as much as possible.

Even in January, when IRA bombs were going off in Soho, Nilsen preferred to frequent the gay bars there rather than go home. By March, he and Gallichan were hardly speaking. One night, Twinkle brought home a 15-year-old boy. Nilsen claims he seduced the youth for the night and dumped him back on Gallichan in the morning. When Gallichan woke up for his dishwashing job, he didn’t know what to do about the boy. He decided just to leave. That evening, Nilsen returned to find the electricity meter smashed and the money stolen. He was furious.

He was also beginning to feel ill from gallstones. Initially, he put his dull pains down to a diet of beer, rum and cheap takeaways. By April, the doctor had told him otherwise, but an operation couldn’t be scheduled for another couple of months. Depressed, he started hanging around the gay drop-in centre again.

By the time Nilsen had had his operation, England was enjoying a record heatwave. Once he was fit again, he was keen to spend the rest of the hot evenings in an alcoholic haze and looking for sex. He describes a number of people he met that summer. The functional encounters suggest a series of anonymous individuals, mainly oriental. And they left him with scabies and crabs.

By day, Nilsen was always the same old colourless ‘monochrome man’, to use the title of his own essay written in Cranley Gardens, but in the evenings his emotions were momentarily released by triggers that would cause them to overwhelm him with startling intensity. Music and alcohol were the main catalysts. Alcohol, he says, was also the ‘social lubricant’ that enabled him to turn sexual possibility into reality. It would give him ‘amazing strength’, both literally and figuratively. He stresses, however, that he was never an alcoholic in the sense that he *needed* to drink *all* the time. His drinking was ‘episodic’ with long gaps between ‘binges’, and this was true throughout his adult life. During drinking sprees, Nilsen would sometimes have black-outs; they worried him.

The more Nilsen got drunk, the more Twinkle probably wanted to leave. The beginning of the end came in the spring of 1977. Nilsen says it

involved his first exposure to ‘death and disturbing bereavement’; an odd statement after his experiences with his grandfather, Aden and the police morgue. This story actually involved Bleep’s puppies, after she’d become pregnant by one of the neighbour’s dogs. One night, Nilsen went down to the off-licence to buy some rum and asked Twinkle to look after them. When he returned, two of the pups had drowned in the garden pond.

Nilsen was livid. He started to think about ways of getting rid of his, now unwanted, flatmate. Two weeks later however, Gallichan, unprompted, met an antiques dealer and moved with him to the West Country. Nilsen doesn’t make a great deal of the passing of Twinkle out of his life.

DCI Peter Jay, and defence psychiatrist Patrick Gallwey, however, considered the abrupt end to Nilsen’s dreams of domesticity to be a catalytic event. For Jay, Nilsen couldn’t bear the rejection of Gallichan leaving, and decided he now wanted companionship that he could control. For Dr Gallwey, a breakdown of that relationship triggered another phase of his personality disorder.

The accounts in *History of a Drowning Boy* of the next year-and-a-half years are increasingly desperate. In 1983, Nilsen told the police that he responded to Gallichan’s departure by picking up a Swiss au pair girl in a bar in the West End, and reminding himself he could be bisexual. He no longer mentions this. Instead, Nilsen presents a catalogue of all the short flings and friendships he made over the summer of 1977 – Barry Pett, Stephen Barrier and Steve Martin all stayed for a while at Melrose Avenue. Steve Martin stayed the longest (about four months); Pett and Barrier stayed for a number of days. Nilsen wants the reader to believe he was perfectly able to partake normally in gay culture, but that it was lonely and fragmented. Instead, the reader is left feeling uneasy about what was clearly happening within him and fearful of what he might do next.

In 1978, Nilsen met Martyn Hunter-Craig, a young man who had recently moved to London and changed his name from Martin Tucker to mark this new chapter in his life. Now, in a big city, he wanted to start again.

Home had previously been Exeter in Devon, where he says his parents had a tumultuous relationship, often arguing, separating and reuniting. As he reached puberty, Hunter-Craig was diagnosed as having emotional problems and was sent to a special school. He always seemed lost in a

dream world and there were also suspicions over his sexuality. He told me: 'I wasn't camp or outrageous as a teenager. I was quite withdrawn. I didn't like it; I didn't want to be that way. I was made to feel quite dirty about it. I've had that hang-up ever since … I think I feel wretched and dirty about it. I don't like it but that's the way it is. I can do nothing about it, can I?'

Hunter-Craig had been in London for some months before meeting Nilsen, but he's not quite sure how many. He found odd bits of casual work and, when it was hard to come by, he would supplement it, where necessary, by sleeping with men for money. Hunter-Craig thinks he met Nilsen around Easter time in 1978; he was nearly 18. Nilsen approached him in an amusement arcade in Leicester Square and struck up a friendly, light-hearted conversation. He looked smart in his beige suit and, without his glasses, his 'sincere' brown eyes were clearly visible.

Hunter-Craig told me: 'We went back to Melrose Avenue and, between then and the time I saw him just before the arrest, I would go there every couple of months or so … definitely a few times a year. I would stay for a couple of days when I needed somewhere to stay. It was very awkward in those days if you were on Social Security. You couldn't book in anywhere, unless it was a hostel, because of the delay getting the cheque from the DHSS. My work was casual. If I wasn't working, I would see who I knew might be able to put me up. From the beginning, he said, "If you need somewhere to stay, please come back".'

Journalists have been unable to agree on Hunter-Craig's testimony. He has appeared on several documentaries but, after the trial, some writers were cautious of him. Ex-*News of the World* journalist John Lisners wrote: 'Men [like Hunter-Craig] are social misfits … strange, emotionally-battered young people … Why was Nilsen attracted to people like this? Why did the apparently respectable, well-groomed civil servant with a flair for politics invite a self-confessed prostitute who lived in a fantasy world back to his flat?'

Other journalists just seemed to dislike him. Douglas Bence, from the *Daily Mirror*, wrote: 'Nilsen had said to him, "Come to bed." Cash changed hands next morning and the impoverished prostitute found he had a free season ticket to a gay bedsitter.'

When I asked Nilsen directly about his relationship with Hunter-Craig, he answered that he had known him but only casually. And yet Hunter-

Craig's DHSS card was one of the items that police found in Nilsen's flat. He also shows detailed knowledge of both flats that Nilsen had lived in. Ultimately, Hunter-Craig's credibility rests on personal judgement.

I traced Hunter-Craig in the summer of 2010. He was living in a council flat in North London. I put a note through his letter box and he replied by ringing the number I'd left. After that, we met twice in nearby pubs. From the old newspaper cuttings I had seen, I was expecting a rangy, wild-looking fellow. When I first I met him in a beer garden near the Heath, he was now stocky and nervous. His voice was soft and he complained of suffering from panic attacks. When I asked him what he'd like to drink, he explained he was trying not to drink at that moment. Although he hadn't been a drinker during the time he'd known Nilsen, he'd made up for it later, apparently. As he rolled his cigarettes, I could see that his fingers were yellow with nicotine stains.

They also shook as he spoke. Although clearly a damaged person, Hunter-Craig also seemed to me to be essentially quite gentle. I sensed he was working hard to keep himself together. He told me he was being treated for his anxiety in a local medical centre and had also been taken on with some paid work there. Most of what Hunter-Craig told me rang true. Sometimes, and often quite obviously, he would exaggerate his knowledge of something or someone. But on the important facts, he was consistent and I found myself generally satisfied that the details he provided of Nilsen during the murder years were largely accurate.

He told me that they had had a brief physical relationship and described what it had been like. 'He was very stiff. I remember saying at the time – although now it seems awful – I said it's like having a relationship with a dead body. He laughed. Well, it wasn't that funny. I said, "I wish you could be a bit more like that when you're doing something." He was passive. Many times you would just lay there. I would say, "Well, this isn't much fun, is it? Are you going to move your legs a little bit?"'

On another couple of occasions, sexual contact was light. 'It was just a bit of fumbling. He'd get naked and then fall asleep. Des wasn't really gay in the sense of relationships. He couldn't really be physically intimate, if for no other reason that he was usually so out of it.'

But Hunter-Craig feels that, as far as he was concerned, Nilsen mainly wanted companionship, and not a sexual relationship. He says Nilsen even

suggested he move in. The memories Hunter-Craig relayed to me were a mixed collection of impressions and episodes. While talking, he would frequently look down with a pained expression.

Nilsen's constant playing of classical and sophisticated pop music – material which 'really turned Des on' – particularly struck Hunter-Craig being, as it was, so different from the music most of his friends listened to. Nilsen's favourites were Rick Wakeman, Mike Oldfield, Elgar, Mahler and Aaron Copeland. If there was a Western on TV, he says that Nilsen would insist they watch it, even though he knew they bored his friend. When commenting on people in the news, he remembered that Des admired strong people, even though he wanted to be with weaker types.

In general, however, Hunter-Craig found Nilsen to be a moderately kind and interesting person. Otherwise, he says, he wouldn't have wanted them to be friends. He does, however, remember Nilsen often provoking arguments for fun; sometimes he was just rude. Hunter-Craig says he didn't mind when Nilsen referred to him as 'Skip', short for Skipper, meaning someone who hung around the docks, but hated it when he refer to him as 'she'. In these spats, Hunter-Craig says he would always give as good as he got. He thinks Nilsen liked that.

Despite Nilsen's interest in film, they would rarely actually go to the cinema, which Hunter-Craig thinks was partly because you couldn't drink in them, and Des always wanted to get drunk. So for entertainment they would either watch TV or go out to north London or Soho pubs. When in company, Hunter-Craig remembers Nilsen being shy and feeling self-consciously like a bore until the moment that, quite suddenly, the alcohol started to work. Then confidence flooded in. After this point, if Nilsen sensed that people were muttering about him, he would become furiously angry. In the taxi or Tube back home, he would explode into a rage. 'It was never to their faces,' Hunter Craig recalls, 'always behind their backs. He would usually say that he was too intellectual for them.'

Back at the flat, Nilsen was fascinated to hear about Hunter-Craig's mother. How did *she* accept his homosexuality, he would ask? The question would be asked so he could make the point that he didn't dare tell *his* mother. He knew how she would react. That was why he was so reluctant to go home for Christmas. That seemed odd to Hunter-Craig; from Nilsen's description and her letters, he didn't think she sounded too bad.

And surely, he thought, a trip home would be nice opportunity to get away from the shabby flat? But although Hunter-Craig remembers the flats as being rough, he says they were certainly not out of place for a bachelor in the late 1970s. ‘Everyone was poor then, and people less house-proud.’ Since leaving the Army, however, Nilsen had become very particular about his own personal hygiene, but he was unbothered about his living space. Hunter-Craig describes the smells of the flats as being ‘an extreme mustiness’. He remembers remarking to Nilsen in Cranley Gardens, ‘Des, what is it about that smell? It seems to follow you around.’

7

WHITEMOOR

'The bodies have gone, everything is gone, there's nothing left, but I still feel in a spiritual communion with these people.'
DENNIS NILSEN, IN A CHANNEL 4 INTERVIEW

On Wednesday, 21 January 1993 at 8.00pm, six million viewers tuned in to Channel 4's *Viewpoint 1993: Murder in Mind* to see Dennis Nilsen, the country's most infamous serial killer, speak. Anyone looking for a ghoulish encounter would not have been disappointed. Dressed in a well-fitting prison-issue shirt, the 47-year-old Nilsen leant back in what looked like a supremely relaxed pose. Only the ashtray in front of him betrayed his nerves.

If members of the public thought it odd that Nilsen had been allowed such TV exposure, officials at the Home Office went into virtual meltdown. During the week leading up to transmission, government lawyers petitioned the High Court for an injunction to stop the documentary going out. Whatever permission had been given to the film-makers, they said, was based on misunderstandings. On the day before the broadcast was due, however, their lawyers stood on the steps of the Royal Courts of Justice and admitted defeat. There was nothing now that could be done to stop the documentary going ahead.

The footage of Nilsen was actually just a small part of an hour-long film on criminal profiling. It was just a clip of about four minutes, used as an example of how understanding killers might help to catch them. Forensic psychologist Paul Britton asked a number of questions off-camera. A close-up of Nilsen behind a table filled the screen. The first thing Britton asked him was how he disposed of the bodies. In a leisurely, schoolmasterly Scottish accent, Nilsen replied:

‘The summer brought a smell problem. I asked myself what would cause this, and came to the conclusion it was the innards. I would pull up floorboards. I’d find it totally unpleasant. I’d get blinding drunk, and start dissection on the kitchen floor.’

‘But if you are going to dismember a body on the kitchen floor, what about the mess?’

‘What mess? No, no, no … If I were to stab you now, there would be lots of blood. The heart is pumping away, there would be blood splattering all over the place. But funnily enough, in a dead body there’s no blood spurts or anything like that. It congeals inside and forms part of the flesh. It’s like anything in a butcher’s shop. There’s little or no blood.’

The film then cut away from the prison to Brian Masters, who was filmed walking through university cloisters. The narrator explained about Masters’ book and how, for years, he had continued to visited Nilsen. Then, facing the camera, Masters explained his theory of how the death of Nilsen’s grandfather had caused Nilsen to associate love with death. He said that when Nilsen wore talcum powder in his mirror fantasies, he did so because he wanted to look dead. The video image then cut back to Nilsen:

‘Making myself up to be dead has nothing to do with being dead. It’s making myself up to be as different as possible to look like someone else. This first occasion you have this young man. You have bathed him. He is now me. He is now my body in the fantasies.’

‘And so what would you do to him?’

‘Carry him in – make him appear even better. I would have some Y-fronts in cellophane. In put that on him because it enhanced his appearance.’

‘And then what?’

‘I would undress him.’

‘What would you do with the body? Would you leave it there on the floor wrapped up, or would you do other things with it?’

‘The most exciting part of the little conundrum was when I lifted the body. When I carried it, it was an expression of my power to lift and carry and have control. And the dangling element of limp limbs was an expression of his passivity. The more passive he could be, the more powerful I was.’

Whatever producer Mike Morley had had in mind when he approached Brian Masters to help introduce him to Mr Nilsen, he could hardly have hoped for a better performance. Not only was Nilsen confident, relaxed and intelligent, he also sounded superior. If Channel 4 had wanted to capture footage of a real-life Hannibal Lecter, then that is exactly what they got.

Their short, edited soundbites made Nilsen seem potent. The man who later described the incident to me in letters, however, simply appeared angry and petulant. He certainly wasn’t prepared to give Central TV, the production company responsible for making the film, any sneaking regard for their skill in achieving such a tricky interview. In a letter to me about the interview, Nilsen recalls:

The interview, recorded by two cameras, took one whole day. I asked for no payment nor did I wish to know the questions in advance. In the room were two men introduced to me as cameramen, Paul Britton (who asked the questions) and Mike Morley overseeing the whole production. I had also loaned Britton Parts I and II (of the autobiography) to help him with my background (I had a job getting these back. He returned these eight months later only when I wrote to Home Office HQ in complaint). So the interview was ‘in the can’ and I awaited the finished product.

In January ’93, the shit hit the proverbial fan. The then Home Secretary, Kenneth Clark, had found out about the project and, politically embarrassed, sought a High Court injunction to stop Central TV using any of the footage. The Home Office’s case (all news to me) held that the taped interview had been conceived and made by and for the purposes of police training by ACPO

(Association of Chief Police Officers) and approved as such by the Home Office. It was never meant for public broadcast, as was wrongly claimed.

So it seems that Morley acted as a front man in a deal with the immediate organisers, and in return he was promised use of some of the footage. As all my letters are censored, it is clear that all in authority at Albany knew full well what was being organised. It also transpired that these two 'cameramen' were, in fact, a Chief Superintendent and a Chief Inspector. The deception had been thorough.

In 2012, I asked Michael Morley in an email to tell me what he thought of a précis I had give him of Nilsen's recollections. He said he thought they were 'not completely accurate, not completely inaccurate either'. The film had initially been cleared, he told me, but authorisation had been removed at the last moment by the Home Office who failed to inform ACPO and the prison. As such, filming went ahead.

Nilsen still seethes over the incident. His indignation, however, is less directed at Morley – to whom he was grateful for the gift of a typewriter – than towards Britton, who had held on to the manuscript for so long. In his writings, he points out that Britton – generally thought of as the inspiration behind ITV's *Cracker* – was later widely criticised for his involvement in the arrest and then subsequent collapse of the case against Colin Stagg for the murder of Rachel Nickell on Wimbledon Common in 1992.

By the time *Murder in Mind* was aired, Nilsen had been moved from Albany Prison on the Isle of Wight to Whitemoor Prison near Peterborough. This brand-new facility had been constructed on the site of some old railway marshalling yards a couple of miles outside the town of March. It was a return to the old Victorian-style wing accommodation. Out, says Nilsen, were the 'hard-to-police' corridors, and in were open galleries.

Nilsen's VPU was housed within a Special Secure Unit situated at the one end of the compound. Nilsen describes the SSU as a 'prison within a prison', with wings A and B for 'vulnerable prisoners', and C and D for 'normal' prisoners. He says that there was a thriving underground economy – illegal alcohol, knives and cannabis were, apparently, commonplace, and

everything from drugs to exotic love birds were available for sale. Those who had money were ‘taxed’ by minor gangsters. Life was noisy, too, with people shouting from their windows late into the night.

Nilsen says in his autobiography that he just wanted to get on with doing his time quietly: ‘Most prisoners just wanted to do their bird and get the hell out of prison. But they were bullied by the gangsters whose philosophy was that of the loser who, in all his self-deluded insecurity, continues to believe he is a winner. The recidivist blames everyone for his failure in life other than himself. If we are to make any positive progress, we must address our own offending behaviour.’

As before, Nilsen’s way of ‘addressing his offending behaviour’ was by throwing himself into the things he believed he was best at, including writing. In the spring of 1993, he turned his creative energies towards both his archive of personal autobiographical pieces, and to the number of regular correspondents he had. Some of these were ‘fans’, thrilled to be in dialogue with such a notorious criminal. But others, including criminologists, psychiatrists and sociologists, had sincere and legitimate, professional reasons to want to try to understand him.

In response to their questions, Nilsen would often try to contextualise his crimes. It was illogical, he would say, to demonise a criminal suffering from a psycho-sexual disorder any more than, for example, a terrorist. If anything, he felt, sex offenders were less culpable than other criminals, as their free will was compromised by a compulsive disorder. Nilsen thought the ‘evil’ actions of many of his neighbours were simply ‘men succumbing to the pressures of their psychological predicament’. His reaction to the murder of a child killer a couple of cells down from him was that it was just ‘another pointless killing to satisfy … the lust for revenge’.

In July 1993, Nilsen received a letter that particularly flattered his ego. It was from an aspiring author called Peter-Paul Hartnett. Hartnett had just begun writing *Call Me*, later to become a cult hit in certain gay circles. At the time, however, Hartnett was working as a special-needs teacher-cum-photographer. One subject that particularly interested him was that of isolation in gay urban culture. The early drafts of what would later become *Call Me* went by the title *A Nasty Piece of Work*. The book told the story of one man’s trawl through the world of classified sex adverts. Hartnett’s anti-

hero, Liam, claims to be a serial killer and, in the final book, frequently makes references to Nilsen.

Hartnett first wrote to Nilsen after reading one of his letters reproduced in the *Evening Standard*. Nilsen had been asked by journalist Tim Barlass to comment on a gay serial killer operating around Earls Court. He would later be identified as Colin Ireland, but at the time he was known as the 'Gay Slayer'. It was believed his crimes might have been connected with Coleherne pub in Earls Court.

Nilsen had also been familiar with that pub. The words of his letter seemed to reveal him as being a bit of an expert on a certain twilight world. Hartnett wondered if this extreme personality might possibly become a sounding-board for his project. In the letter, he explained he was mainly interested in Nilsen's thoughts on isolation and Hartnett's writing, not on Nilsen's crimes. After a few letters, the two men decided that their conversations might be better conducted face to face.

The governor's office initially granted a one-off discretionary hour together. Nilsen describes the meeting in his book. He says he was thrilled to meet someone he considered so glamorous. Hartnett, aged 35, was tall, about Nilsen's height, with similar dark hair and a boyishly handsome face. Nilsen says, 'He looked really cool, and we hit it off as if we had been acquainted all our lives.' Later, after conducting a full background check, the prison authorities found unspecified reasons to decline further visiting rights. Still, Hartnett and Nilsen kept up a correspondence that would last for years.

The recognition Nilsen received from Hartnett and Barlass made Nilsen feel like an amateur psychologist. Now that he felt he was coming up with valuable answers, he was increasingly keen to tell anyone who cared to ask that he had received very little analysis of his own condition. In 1993, however, the prisoner was persuaded to take part in the country's new Sex Offender Treatment Programme – one of the world's first. Pilot projects had been judged a success and now the SOTP was being rolled out across the country. The scheme was underpinned by the principles of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT).

CBT is a process of intensive therapy designed to alter how people think and behave. Today, it is widely used to treat everything from depression to

paedophilia. It is a ‘talking therapy’ but, unlike psychotherapy, CBT concentrates on practical techniques to modify attitudes and behaviour. Typically, sex offender patients on such courses will be required to work their way through folder upon folder of worksheets. They will question their sexual preoccupations, impulsiveness and emotional control. Afterwards, a series of exercises will be prescribed to change the way the subject thinks and acts. Where possible, these might then be tested with lie detectors or other measuring tools.

The therapy, however, is heavily reliant on motivation and co-operation. Patients really have to want to change and work hard for it. Nilsen soon decided that the programme was not telling him anything he hadn’t already worked out for himself. He hardly mentions the course in his autobiography. Elsewhere, in essays and letters, what he has to say is disparaging. In his essay entitled ‘Anatomy of an Official Conclusion’, he says: ‘I learned nothing new from this SOTP which I had not learned from myself years before.’

Part of this attitude was down to Nilsen’s natural antipathy towards psychology and authority. But it was also because, after several years of self-analysis, the serial killer believed he now possessed the ability to unravel his own psychology. Underpinning his examination was a theoretical framework he had come up with and which he called the ‘Psychograph’. This was a term that had been used previously by phrenologists and handwriting experts to describe a graphical representation of mental attributes. For Nilsen, however, the psychograph is simply the mental map that early experiences leave as their legacy for the adult.

Nilsen didn’t just apply the concept of the psychograph to himself. He started to use his theories as a way of describing the workings of other killers. One was Jeffrey Dahmer, about whom Brian Masters was in the process of finishing a book. On the surface, Dahmer’s crimes, around Milwaukee in the USA, were carbon copies of Nilsen’s. He was another gay loner, who brought men back and killed them in perversely ‘affectionate’ ways. Nilsen, however, doesn’t like the comparisons that many have made. His analysis of Dahmer is full of quibbles that any similarities between them are superficial. He wants it known he didn’t keep trophies, or regularly take photographs, or have desire to eat any human flesh.

Nilsen also pours scorn on Masters' book, *The Shrine of Jeffrey Dahmer*. He writes in *History of a Drowning Boy*: 'I certainly got no clearer recognition of Dahmer the man from reading it. Dahmer's aberrations were sculpted in society's response to his malforming "psychograph", which trapped him in an impersonal fantasy life. His genetic uniqueness had succumbed to the battering of a lack of psychological nourishment. In early years, he had become so removed from tactile and emotional contact with his fellow creatures that his condition became ingrained by volition of combined circumstances acting throughout his life.'

An incident from Master's promotion of his book on Jeffrey Dahmer proved the catalyst to end the ongoing contact between killer and author. In May 1994, Nicky Campbell from BBC Radio 1 interviewed Masters about his unusual relationship with serial killers. Towards the end of the interview, the conversation moved from Dahmer to Nilsen.

Nilsen doesn't say *exactly* what it was that he objected to so much – now, however, that was almost beside the point. More than anything, Nilsen was incensed at the way Masters had taken 'possession' of his life story. He mentions feeling a surge of annoyance about being what he calls 'Masters' commodity'. Now, he felt, was the time to terminate their strange relationship. He did it with a phone call.

Despite being a Category A prisoner, Nilsen was allowed to use a phonecard. Whereas now prisoners may only call people on approved lists through an operator, in those days, Nilsen says, prisoners allowed to use the phone could call straight out. Nilsen's first telephone call in 11 years was to the Garrick Club in London where Brian Masters was a member. When he was put through to a bar steward he asked him to find the author and say 'Des' was on the phone. Masters was chatting with actors Keith Waterhouse and Rodney Bewes. When the steward told him who was calling, Masters nearly spilled his drink, fearful that Nilsen might have escaped. Nilsen appears to have enjoyed making Masters uncomfortable and informed him that he wanted to end their ongoing relationship. Masters told me that this 'came as a relief'.

In 1994, Nilsen had been a convicted prisoner for just over 10 years. He may have no longer had any contact with his family nor Brian Masters, but he did have Jonny Marling and other correspondents. Moreover, despite

frequent disagreements with the authorities, he knew if he behaved himself, theoretically, after another 15 years he would have been eligible to apply for parole.

In the back of Nilsen's mind was always the thought that one day he might be able to taste freedom. Any such flickers of optimism, however, were extinguished in the summer of 1994 when rumours spread about a change in the law that was going to allow the Home Secretary to set 'whole-life tariffs'. Previously, all sentence-setting was the preserve of judges. But in December 1994, Michael Howard, the Conservative Party's Home Secretary, drew up his list of those who would be subject to the principle of 'life meaning life'.

The passage in *History of a Drowning Boy* that deals with this is full of bravado. Nilsen proudly informs readers that his reaction to seeing his name there was stoic. He apparently doesn't want people to think his emotions could be so easily affected by acts of others. More revealing about his psychology, however, may be how he describes reactions to the only woman on the list, the Moors Murderer, Myra Hindley. Nilsen comments on the public perception of her, and the feelings of her victims. His words show a disturbing perspective: 'It also seems that some relatives of the cruelly murdered children have themselves been contaminated by perpetual active hatred of the hated object. Hate is not a very healthy foundation on which to build anyone's life. It's a sad indictment of the progress of the human spirit when the relative of a victim can announce, "Hate is all I have".'

Even though Nilsen's words are grotesquely offensive, it is likely he isn't really thinking about Hindley's victims at all. By condemning the 'hate' he sees directed at Hindley, Nilsen implies that he feels any hatred similarly directed at him is also unfair. Throughout his writing, Nilsen frequently talks about other killers in terms that sound like a projection of feelings about his own case that he has difficulty approaching directly. Many years later, for instance, he observes that the Soham murderer, Ian Huntley, may have been far more ashamed that he could be aroused by two small girls than he was about killing them. And Nilsen says that Huntley, Brady and Hindley – in fact, most multiple murderers – could only kill because they were totally devoid of empathy for their victims. Interestingly, Nilsen may not have been forming this opinion without some first-hand

evidence – in 1999, the *Daily Star* reported that Nilsen had had some correspondence with Ian Brady.

After discussing Hindley and the other killers on the 'whole-life tariff' list, Nilsen ends with a declaration of how in tune with morality he feels he has again become. He seems suddenly uncomfortable about how his previous words might be perceived: 'Personally, I will not be pleading for release in my own case because the pain my actions have caused will only terminate with the deaths of the sufferers. When the pain of life touches me, I force myself to think of the pain of my victims (including relatives) and that brings me back to learning how insignificant my suffering is.'

Although Nilsen has never appealed his sentence, in 1992 and 1993 he started thinking about it. Among working drafts for *History of a Drowning Boy* are some scribbled notes entitled 'Appeal Papers'. There were no thought-through plans of action, but he did devote a number of sheets of A4 to discussing – seemingly just to himself – how he exaggerated his confessions at the time of his arrest under what he says was pressure from Jay and Chambers at Hornsey Police Station. He then speculates as to whether, by bringing this to the attention of a court, he might persuade them to reduce his sentence to manslaughter.

Such musings, however, were short-lived. Ironically, just at the time he was thinking about whether an appeal might ever be possible, his descriptions of life sound like the words of a man who was becoming comfortably institutionalised. Indeed, throughout 1994, Nilsen's life sounds more like a man at college than a Category A prisoner. He describes an almost never-ending series of hobbies and extra-curricular activities. Nilsen says he contributed a column to a magazine for inmates called *The Insider*, under the humorous moniker 'Nilsen, The Pink Panther' (as distinct from Donald Nielson, The Black Panther).

There were also regular contributions to a small circulation adult comic called *Bozo*, described as the 'the mad uncle of *Viz*'. Elsewhere, he acted in a play, John Godber's *Up 'n' Under*. Nilsen's aspirations as a visual artist were satisfied when his friend Jonny Marling sent in a large canvas. The result was a large oil painting-cum-collage called 'Bacardi Sunrise' which included a cut-out photograph of a naked youth.

Marling had now been a regular visitor for some years. When a visit wasn't possible, they would sometimes exchange tape recordings. Nilsen

would send recordings that showed progress with his new favourite hobby – writing music on his electronic keyboard. His rudimentary musical doodles were given grand names like ‘Symphonic Suite’, and ‘Nilsen’s Prelude’.

The relaxed atmosphere abruptly changed on 9 September 1994. Life at Whitemoor was turned upside down in the prison when six IRA prisoners from the Special Secure Unit escaped. When they were apprehended, a pistol was retrieved; it had been used to shoot a dog handler. Semtex was discovered in their property.

The authorities reacted to the breach with a massive clamp-down. Special searches were conducted on every prisoner. In Nilsen’s room, the guards found copies of two soft-core gay magazines, *Vulcan* and *Him*, that Nilsen enjoyed. He was livid. ‘The establishment reeked of active homophobia,’ he moaned, adding, ‘Their attitude had not changed since Wakefield in the mid-80s.’

Some years later, stories about Nilsen’s belief that gay pornography in prison was an equalities issue would become national news. In April 1995, however, the *Daily Mirror* felt they had better stories to run. They printed a three-part series. First was a story about Nilsen’s grief over a dead budgie; then they showed photographs taken by warders in Nilsen’s cell on a disposable camera sent in by Marling; finally, they published a long piece about a pilot scheme in Albany that had included Nilsen in its testing procedures. It involved the deployment of a Penile Plesythmograph (PPG) machine which was used as part of the Sex Offender Treatment Programme. The *Mirror*’s story was headed ‘250 JAIL PHOTOGRAPHS TURNED ME ON TO GIRLS’.

The PPG technology was not originally intended to be used on sex offenders. It was pioneered by the Czechoslovakian military in the 1950s to ascertain whether conscripts who claimed to be homosexual to avoid national service really were what they claimed to be. The device works by attaching two bands on the body: a strain-gauge on the penis to measure engorgement, and a cuff on the finger to measure sweat. A series of images are then shown to the patient to determine the trigger of sexual arousal. The images include controls – images of ‘appropriate’ sexuality – and scenes depicting ‘deviant’ interest. Along with polygraphs, or lie detectors, the PPG is considered an extremely important tool for offender rehabilitation.

The *Daily Mirror* reported that while the tests were being set up, Nilsen had quipped, ‘I suppose I’ll have to pay you for this.’ Once completed, he complained, ‘You should be paying me for this – it’s rubbish.’ When the results came back, Nilsen mocks them by saying that they were so off target they indicated he was primarily attracted to middle-aged women. As for the pictures intended to arouse paedophiles, he said they were ‘so boring I couldn’t concentrate’.

Nilsen simply wasn’t prepared to enter into the spirit of the programme. But still, in *History of a Drowning Boy*, where Nilsen talks about the PPG machine, his observation are humorous and, probably, perceptive. His says that while the images were presented to him, his mind was wandering off. If his fingers were sweating, he tells his would-be readers, it was probably because he needed a cigarette. He wondered if other subjects simply became turned on by having a female psychiatrist ordering them to drop their trousers before placing a cuff on their penis.

Nilsen had considered the PPG machine to be the stuff of fiction, and not even particularly good material. Still, such experiences and, no doubt, also stories he would hear from fellow cons, contributed to an idea that he might try to write fiction himself. Around this time, he had heard that his pen-pal P-P Hartnett had given up his day-job teaching to become a full-time writer. How hard, he wondered, could it be?

What Nilsen started to write was, quite incredibly, the premise for a serial-killer movie. It involved a fashion photographer called Sed Neslin. He owned an old Securicor van, into which he had fitted a lever from the cab which could divert exhaust gases to the back. In spring and summer, he would go and cruise up and down motorways looking for hitch-hikers, both male and female teenagers, whom he could lure with promises of taking modelling pictures. He would bundle old junk on to the passenger seat, so he could have an excuse that it was essential to travel in the back. The cargo area of the van was sound-proofed against screams, and whatever sounds might have still penetrated were blocked out by tapes he would play of ‘The Laughing Policeman’ and ‘My Old Man’s a Dustman’. At his home, Neslin has a studio in his basement with a preparation table in the middle, with vices to hold bodies and cosmetics to apply to them. He photographs the bodies in all kinds of poses before packing them into his freezer.

‘Cynics,’ Nilsen writes, in apparent ignorance of how utterly appalling his story is, ‘will say he [Nilsen] is planning his next crime.’ Nilsen was now, however, thinking of himself as much as a writer as a murderer, and he was encouraged to do so by others. He would soon even see his name appear alongside Edgar Allan Poe, P D James, Truman Capote and Norman Mailer when Ruth Rendell published an excerpt of his essay, ‘The Psychograph’, in an anthology she had edited. It was on the subject of why people murder and was called *The Reason Why: An Anthology of the Murderous Mind* (1996).

In the summer of 1996, the former television newscaster Gordon Honeycowmbe rekindled an earlier interest in writing a study on Nilsen’s crimes. Honeycombe had been a familiar figure to British audiences first from 1965–77 as an ITN newscaster. From 1984–89, the 6ft-4in Cornishman presented the news bulletins on ITV’s new breakfast show, *TV-am*. On screen, with his prominent receding hairline, he looked authoritative, if slightly stern. Off camera, he was a hearty character with a successful sideline as an author. One of his most successful books had been about Scotland Yard’s Crime Museum, being published just before Nilsen’s arrest. In April 1983, Honeycombe wrote to Nilsen suggesting that he might consider supplying him with information to help him write a study on the case. Nilsen asked his solicitor Ronald Moss to reply that he would rather have Masters write about the case.

After leaving *TV-am* in 1989, Honeycombe retired to Australia, and would occasionally return to the UK to visit friends. In September 1995, a chance conversation in a London pub led to him discovering that one of Nilsen’s surviving victims, a Scotsman called Douglas Stewart, was living nearby. Now he saw another opportunity to deal with the subject. Apparently, Stewart wanted to talk. Honeycombe had also read about Carl Stottor’s letters to Nilsen from an article in the *Observer* newspaper. The author wondered if there might be enough material available to tell the Nilsen story from the victim’s perspective.

When Honeycombe met Stewart, however, he found him odd. The young Scotsman told a far-fetched story about Nilsen having an accomplice. Even though it seemed outlandish, Honeycombe decided to follow this up on his next trip. He also wondered if Nilsen himself might

co-operate in his project. Back in Australia, Honeycombe wrote to Nilsen reminding him how, in 1983, he had written to him with a proposal to write about the case. Then he told of his meeting with Stewart and explained the rationale behind his 'victims' book. In the letter, Honeycombe also made a suggestion that Nilsen might consider contributing his own thoughts and memories.

Nilsen replied with a long letter. He said he would be happy to contribute, but warned that Honeycombe might find Stewart untrustworthy. It seemed very odd to the author that someone might want to volunteer such judgements about someone they'd tried to kill. In the end, however, Stewart did indeed prove unreliable – or, at least, unavailable. When Honeycombe tried to reach him again, he had disappeared.

Now that Honeycombe was in touch with Nilsen himself, and he seemed prepared to talk, he started to wonder if he might actually use the killer's confessions as the starting point for a project that would look at the case from all sides. If Nilsen would co-operate, Honeycombe thought, he could start by looking at how Nilsen remembered events and then fill in the other parts of the story with later research. He wrote to Nilsen with a series of questions.

The prisoner responded to each point in turn. Above all, he said he wanted to make it clear he didn't think Masters' book was satisfactory, and he wanted to put the record straight. There was no need, however, for him and Honeycombe to embark on a lengthy autobiographical correspondence about his life as he was, in fact, already writing a book.

This presented a potential problem. If Nilsen was writing a book, Honeycombe was sure he would be doing things in his own, inevitably unreliable, way. But he remained undeterred. He was sure if he could persuade Nilsen to let him use his memoirs to form the backbone of a book, then he would be able to balance his words with the testimony of others.

Another letter was dispatched to Nilsen saying he could be able to help with a publisher but *only* if Nilsen relinquished any idea of editorial control. Honeycombe pressed on him the need for this to be a serious, credible study, not a volume of a serial killer's propaganda. Honeycombe emphasised how it was imperative to include statements from people who had opposing perspectives.

Nilsen seemed to agree with these suggestions. He even volunteered a suggestion for what he might like to do with his royalties – he wanted them offered to a victim's charity. The manner in which Nilsen expressed it, however, betrayed signs of his pathological ego: 'I would never exploit revelations in my own life for personal financial gain. Now that would be immoral,' he said. He then speculated whether, with film rights, his royalties might amount to half a million pounds.

Within months, Nilsen completed two more volumes of memoirs. But by the spring of 1996, Honeycombe's publisher had now decided the project was too controversial for them. He told Nilsen not to worry, as he still had others in mind, and to make sure the serial killer didn't go cold on him, he kept writing from Australia. Soon, however, he started noticing a difference in Nilsen's letters. Direct replies to questions were avoided and increasingly replaced by Nilsen deriding the prison system or emphasising his achievements.

Honeycombe decided he might get further by talking to Nilsen directly. On his next trip back, in July 1996, he asked for a visiting order to be submitted. In response, he was granted a two-hour session. Honeycombe later told me that the first thing that struck him on arriving at Whitemoor was how incredibly tight the security was. Even tea and coffee could only be bought with plastic tokens.

Honeycombe said he bought a cup of tea and sat down. The visitors' room was like a school hall. Despite the post-IRA escape atmosphere, the warders he spoke to recognised him from his TV work and were chatty and friendly. They also appeared to be slightly proud of their high-profile prisoner. When Nilsen finally arrived, he seemed taller than he had imagined. His manner was confident, and educated. But with the thick glasses, grey hair, bad teeth and pale skin his general appearance was 'somewhat like a seedy academic'.

Nilsen spoke in a jovial, slightly bombastic manner. But at several points in the conversation, Honeycombe told me he couldn't help looking down at Nilsen's thin, white and peculiarly shaven hands that had robbed his victims of their lives. 'How can I trust this man enough to work with him?' he wondered. He was also curious about this friend, Jonny Marling, to whom Nilsen constantly referred.

Nilsen had now apparently developed a total and unquestioning faith in Marling. Just as Nilsen had wanted to offer up everything to Masters during the high point in their relationship, so Nilsen now sought to entrust everything to this new friend. All of his writing was sent straight to Marling's lock-up in Bath. And so, after seeing Nilsen in prison, Honeycombe immediately scheduled a meeting at Marling's home.

When Marling opened the door of his suburban home, Honeycombe was immediately struck by the normality of his married life. Marling was 29, with a pleasant, well-spoken manner. He had two daughters and ran a successful business. And yet he also had a garage full of Nilsen's writing and correspondence. After the pleasantries were over, Marling went through the boxes on the kitchen table.

Looking through all the letters sent to Nilsen, Honeycombe noticed many of these 'admirers' included photographs of themselves. Many of these, Honeycombe noticed, looked just like Nilsen himself. After about an hour going through the letters, Honeycombe asked if he could see the manuscript itself. But now there was a problem; Des, it seemed, had actually placed it in the hands of a solicitor for safe keeping. And it wouldn't be easy to get access.

Marling explained why. After sending the manuscript to the solicitor's – Blakemore's of Stratford-upon-Avon – one of the firm's partners had become nervous about the extent to which they could legally act as an intermediary. They had decided to go to a QC for clarification. This resulted in a bill of £3,000. Honeycombe didn't want to pay it, and so, Parts II, III and IV of Nilsen's memoirs stayed in the solicitor's safe until 1998 when Marling came up with the money. Honeycombe returned to Australia.

One section of the book, however – 'Orientation in Me', Nilsen's so-called 'sexual history' – was waiting for him when he got back. This volume had been written separately from the rest of the book and Nilsen had managed to have it sent out independently. Honeycombe decided to start on this and deal with the gaps in Nilsen's life separately. But before he started investing any more of his own time in the project, he wanted to clarify in writing that Nilsen was unambiguously in agreement with what they were doing. Despite Nilsen's reasonable manner, he didn't trust him one bit. He told me he felt that he was being manipulated, and that Nilsen sought to destabilise him by not answering his questions.

Honeycombe's fears that Nilsen was playing some kind of 'power game' were soon confirmed. Nilsen now denied ever having been aware of any plans for the book to include other people's opinions. This was – unequivocally – to be '*his autobiography*' he said. Honeycombe says, 'As with others before, like Brian Masters, and most of his correspondents, Nilsen lost interest and dumped me.'

Nilsen, however, was undeterred by the setback. He wrote to P-P Hartnett – now an established author – and asked if he might help edit the book. Hartnett agreed. But when Nilsen started to try to formalise this arrangement, he discovered that the prison authorities, who had previously seemed uninterested in what he was doing, were now well aware of the nature of the manuscript and wanted to prevent him progressing with it. Nilsen recalled in a letter to me, '[The Home Office imposed] a ban on all discussion of the project between me and P-P. Letters were stopped and sent back to him (contracts etc). I was also informed that no draft of the MS would be allowed into prison and that I would never be allowed to see or read the published book.'

There was still nothing, however, to stop the existing drafts being published. Furthermore, Nilsen felt he and Hartnett could make some progress through coded letters and by reading out extracts on audio cassettes. He told Hartnett he was happy for him to try to start generating interest. This led, in 1998, to a piece appearing in the *Daily Mirror* with the headline 'EX-TEACHER WHO WANTS £30,000 FOR KILLER NILSEN'S SICK MEMOIRS'. This sum was the amount they claimed Hartnett wanted for the serialisation rights. There was also talk of a film. Hartnett was quoted as saying, 'It is sensational. It is not the rantings of a madman. It is well written. Your readers will be astounded.'

Nilsen, however, felt that even if someone was prepared to publish the book as it was, the book was still far from satisfactory. And he had also now lost faith in Harnett's ability to complete the project. He complained to me that, based on what he had been able to see, Hartnett's 'voice and style intrude too much'. On top of that, the attention the news stories had brought on him had again resulted in copy of the gay pornography magazine *Vulcan* to be confiscated along with a 'sexy art book' by Pierre and Gilles. This had made him furious.

It was the *Daily Mirror* article about Hartnett and the '£30,000' autobiography that prompted my first letter to Nilsen. Having recently completed a journalism diploma, I was in the habit of scouring the news for stories to investigate. I had previously read *Killing for Company*. Between that and what I had read in the newspaper, I found the idea of him writing an autobiography intriguing. How could he or any publisher justify it? It wasn't just the offence it would cause, it was equally the prospect of him being deceptive. But for the purposes of a newspaper story, Nilsen's possible motives just made it all the more interesting. I decided to add him to my list of speculative letters that week.

Before writing, I thought hard about how to approach him. Gitta Sereny's book on Mary Bell had just been released – Bell had killed children when still a child herself – and rather come straight out and interrogate him about *his* book, I decided to ask him what he thought of that one. A week later, I received a 16-page dissertation handwritten in thick, black Biro. The subject of Mary Bell had clearly struck a chord: 'The Mary Bell controversy,' he told me, 'is generated by a fear, on foundations of hypocrisy, by society which becomes deeply agitated when the spotlight of close examination falls upon itself and our own hallowed myths. History had dismissed the traumas of Mary Bell from its consciousness merely by placing her outside the realms of human experience, with the expedient use of the label "monster", and shelving her inside a penal institution. This method spared society from having to acknowledge their association with her name and saved them the bother of having to think too much of her actions as a human in a community. Justice was done and she was gone – out of sight and out of mind. Her voice is always the voice of others.'

Nilsen sounded like he was writing more about himself than Mary Bell. He seemed insistent that *his* voice was that of others. The subtext was that he wanted people to know he still existed and to hear it from him. Most importantly for me, at the time, was that he seemed prepared to give me a privileged insight into what he had to say. I started to ask around for a publication interested in a piece on Nilsen. Several were keen, but I needed more material. I wrote back to Whitemoor Prison. Over the next seven months, Nilsen wrote me nearly 30,000 words of autobiography, politics, poetry and chat.

At the outset, dealing with Nilsen felt less unnerving than I had feared. In the main, he seemed quite charming and eccentric. Despite his constant complaining, he was also interesting. It wasn't just his crimes and prison life he spoke about – he had well-considered cynical opinions on current affairs. He was also funny. 'Functioning under prison management isn't only punishing,' he once told me, 'it's embarrassing.'

Reading Nilsen's letters could also, quite literally, be educational. He was so keen to show off his learning, sometimes it seemed like he was copying things out of an encyclopaedia. He would quote people like Edward Gibbons and Henri Amiel. Sometimes, I wondered if this might also be because he was slightly autistic. If he spoke about a typewriter or cassette player, there would always be the exact make and model number. And he would also become a little vexed if I forgot to acknowledge the exact date of his last letter, as if you had broken a rule of protocol that was very important to him.

Nilsen's adherence to his etiquette meant he would always reply by return of post. And he never sent unsolicited letters; he thought that inappropriate. Sometimes, there seemed something almost quaint about exchanging letters in this way. I could often forget this was a man who had repeatedly killed. Despite his intensity, he seemed like many other fastidious, nerdy oddballs I'd known. He was fixated with details, and creating arguments that defended his world view. When I later saw his cartoons, drawings and tape recordings, it struck me that, if this had been the only side to his character, he might have made a reasonable schoolteacher.

When Nilsen spoke of his crimes, his lack of perspective was quite terrifying. He could talk about squeezing the life out of someone in one sentence and the confiscation of his spider plant in the next. His proclamations of remorse always felt like he was saying what he thought were the 'right things'. He told me, 'Just because I do not make demonstrative expressions of remorse does not rule out that I can and do feel great personal remorse for the damage my actions have caused. Weeping and pain is a very personal circumstance not open to exhibition at official interviews. Remorse is not just saying it, it is doing it.'

Despite his protestations that he was living the most positive, constructive life he could through his hobbies, I remained unconvinced that

Nilsen was actually doing anything that he didn't like. Soon, I started to notice that for all he said, he never actually seemed 'sad'. He neither seemed to want to shed tears nor listen to others. He wrote as if he felt he was a guru dispensing wisdom. This superior demeanour made me feel reluctant to challenge him. Later, I wondered if I was being manipulated or just being hesitant? I thought maybe I was frightened of whether he might be able do something unpleasant if I upset him. Maybe he had some nasty friends on the outside.

At the end of the year, I had a pile of letters but no real story. I started to wonder why exactly I was writing all these letters, and decided to stop.

It was several years before another newspaper article prompted me to write to Nilsen again. During that time, I would sometimes wonder who else wrote to Nilsen, and how he spoke to them. Later, when I saw examples, I discovered my correspondence was not atypical. He dispensed the same empty-sounding words to everyone, and had written Matthew Malekos an almost identical letter to one he had written me: 'If I had been really strong morally I should have called the police that morning I killed Stephen Holmes. I did not and many others died as I clung selfishly to self-preservation and remained subservient to a selfish power of the ritual. So I am fully culpable for my results and that is that: I guess I will have to resist complaining about length of sentence.'

8

FROM FANTASY TO MURDER

'In 1978, I entered a personal pit of imbalances which scored 10 out of 10, and this became unbearable to the point of acute desperation. In the past, I had had always a couple of points in my favour. Now I had nothing: I drank and became a murderer to begin the cycle. More drinking at the despair I was a murderer and more murders. It was a downward spiral. There was no one I had trust in to turn to but a small dog who could offer no solutions.'

DENNIS NILSEN, IN A LETTER TO THE AUTHOR

Dennis Nilsen's calm recollections of how he strangled up to 15 men are horrific. Moreover, despite being true, they are so stylised they barely seem real. The most graphic accounts were written in 1983. Later confessions are, thankfully, more about reasons than acts – in *History of a Drowning Boy* he mainly directs the reader to things he has said previously for the details. Still, those earlier words show how little he saw his victims as real people. Fifteen young men were described simply in terms of their appearance. Their deaths were written about almost like fantasies. Among all the minutiae and florid prose there is no believable sense of the physicality of killing, nor mention of the terror in the victim's eyes.

Nilsen's first murder was the day before New Year's Eve 1978. He was now 33 and had spent Christmas alone with his dog. He told Masters that his loneliness had become 'a long, unbearable pain'. His manuscript underscores that disconnection to the world around him. It was the bitterly cold 'Winter of Discontent'; misery engulfed London. Sex fantasies, drinking and isolation had got the better of Dennis Nilsen. By the time New Years' Eve was looming, his self-pitying desolation was coming to a head. He sat at home drinking and listening to music. In a letter to me, he said: 'Man knows not what alienation is until he has experienced the severity of absolute detachment I was feeling on the morning of 30 December '78.'

That evening, he felt he had to get out of the house. It was a quiet day in town. People were either relaxing after Christmas or gearing up for the New Year celebrations. Only one pub near Melrose Avenue was full. It was the

Cricklewood Arms on Cricklewood Broadway, known for its rough Republican Irish crowd. It was not the sort of place that Nilsen usually frequented. The same was true of the young man he met by the bar, but at least he was Irish. Nilsen hoped he might also be homosexually inclined.

Nilsen told police: 'He was much shorter than I was. About 5ft 6in. He was southern Irish and had short, dark-brown, curly hair. His hands were rough. At closing time he indicated to me that he had too far to travel. We went back to Melrose Avenue and started drinking. We had a damn good old drink and, later on, I remember thinking, "He'll probably be going soon – another ship passing in the night".

'The next morning, I had a corpse on my hands. He was dead … I wanted company over the New Year. There was desperation for company. My tie was around his neck.'

Nilsen talks as if his actions took him totally by surprise; the facts suggest otherwise. We now know from *History of a Drowning Boy* that he had long been used to taking advantage of unconscious bodies and masturbating to scenarios that involved death. Furthermore, can we really believe he spontaneously came up with the method of strangulation using a tie? Surely, if he had strangled the boy without having ever imagined the scenario, he would have done so with his bare hands? Instead, he used the far more efficent and certain method of wrapping a tie aroud his neck and pulling with all his might.

Nilsen will never, however, allow any suggestion that his crimes were premeditated. Instead, he simply tells us that depression, alcohol and a deviant sex drive came together that night. In his pseudo-psychological language, murder then became 'a cruel medicine to sedate encroaching insanity'. He says 'fantasy exploded into reality', and that, 'loosened by alcohol', he lost all control. The explanations he gives are, nearly all, very hazy.

Comparing what he has written at different times helps fill in the picture. The description he gave at Hornsey Police Station was brief. But another account of the same event, this time written much later for Brian Masters' *Killing for Company*, is much more elaborate. It also gives a much clearer sense of how fantasy and the opportunity came together.

Nilsen says he 'snuggled up to him and put my arm around him. He was still fast asleep … I pulled the blanket off us and halfway down our bodies.

He was on his side turned away from me. I ran my hand over him, exploring him. I remember thinking that because it was morning he would wake and leave me. I became extremely aroused and I could feel my heart pounding and I began to sweat. He was still sound asleep. I looked down on the floor where our clothes lay and my eyes fixed on my tie. I remember thinking that I wanted him to stay with me over the New Year whether he wanted to or not. I reached out and got the neck tie. I raised myself and slipped it on under his neck.'

Still, he is vague about what was so arousing. Was this a scene that he had recently used in masturbation? Or was it that he had really become physically excited at the prospect of attacking his victim? In *History of a Drowning Boy*, however, Nilsen does, finally, attempt a psychological explanation of the emotional subtext. After he got the youth back to the flat, he says he started to have flashbacks to the boy in the cabin from his adolescent dreams. Simultaneously, he both wanted that moment not to end, and for the body of the young man to be part of his 'old man' mirror fantasy. Specifically, he wanted to become the old man, and for the boy's body to represent himself. He describes his murder rituals as a 'dualism' and a 'perverted sort of mating' with himself: 'The whole conundrum is alive with Narcissusia [*sic*] – this almost total attachment to self. When eventually the body is put out of sight and changes into decay, it reappears as something new: i.e. putrefying dead meat to be disposed of. The paradox about my fantasy view of these bodies is that the primary aim while they were in use was to make them look as pure and alive as possible.'

In other words, he believes that when he obtained a body, it was really a way of having sex with himself. And, as soon as that body started to decay, he no longer saw it as connected to the living person it had once been. It was something 'other' – an object to be disposed of.

It took 23 years for the 'Irish youth' to be identified as 14-year-old Stephen Holmes. Holmes was not a runaway, nor was there any sign he had had gay tendencies. On the contrary, he was popular and liked loud music and football. The night he disappeared, he had just been to see a local rock band. Full of rebellious energy, he may have dropped into the pub in Cricklewood on his way home to see if he could get served and to keep warm before getting the bus home. Just as seeing a band had seemed a grown-up thing to do, being in a bar with an adult would have flattered him.

Holmes would also probably have soon become too intoxicated to make sensible judgements about whom he was talking to.

The boy's mother, Kathleen, a waitress, reported her son missing soon after his disappearance, and continued to campaign to find him until her death in 2002. With few good photographs of Stephen, she failed to make headway. Holmes' remaining relatives have found it too painful to talk about his death.

After killing Holmes, Nilsen washed his body and lay him down on his bed. The sexual possibilities of having him there were offset by the immediate shock of the situation. Nilsen's confessions, however, sound more confused than horrified. He was sure the police would soon turn up. And yet, instead of hiding the evidence, he wrapped the body in a curtain and went to bed for the rest of the day to sleep off his hangover.

The next day was New Year's Day. Now, with a clearer head, Nilsen started to panic and tried to put the body under the floorboards. But rigor mortis had set in and it wouldn't fit.

He waited another day. Now the body was less stiff, so he pulled the boards up again. The cat, Deedee, got in there, and it took several minutes to coax her out. Nilsen was pleased, however, to see how wide the spaces were between the beams supporting the floorboards. Once removed, there was plenty of room to put the body in.

He ripped up Holmes' clothing and put it with his shoes into the dustbin. A week later, he wondered if the body had started to decompose. He disinterred it, and then stripped himself naked before taking the body up to the bathroom, washing and inspecting it. The body was still intact. He admired Holmes' corpse for a while, then he contemplated buying an electric carving knife to cut it into smaller pieces. After some moments, he dismissed the idea as ludicrous. Finally, he placed the body back under the floorboards where it stayed for a little over seven months.

It wasn't until 11 August 1979 that Nilsen decided to get rid of the remains. Still wrapped in the curtain, he placed the body on a large bonfire. The fences around the garden were about 6ft high, but the scene was still clearly visible from neighbours' windows. Nilsen didn't, however, go to any great lengths to hide the pyre. In various declarations of loneliness, he says he no longer believed anyone really cared what went on in his flat.

The most obvious psychological effect becoming a murderer had on Nilsen was simply to increase his general sense of depression. After the arrest, Nilsen would tell DCI Jay that it 'amazed' him that he had no tears for the victims. His later writings make references to his extreme unhappiness, but he says it was a private matter and didn't change his behaviour at work. It didn't stop him paying his bills, or writing letters to his mother. He did, however, do one thing to try to try to stop it happening again.

In the period of a little more than seven months between killing and burning Holmes, Nilsen made a concerted effort to reduce and change the pattern of his drinking. To begin with, he says he thought he must have committed the murder because he had been blind drunk and lost control. There is no particular reason to doubt that he really believed this – especially as he now went to some effort to change his behaviour. He didn't give up drinking altogether – he would see occasional friends or sometimes go for a drink after work – but he avoided drinking heavily in gay bars and inviting young men back.

Although Nilsen made modest efforts to avoid committing another murder, he had no interest in handing himself in. For four years, he says his main instinct was for what he called 'self-preservation'. Thoughts of suicide even came before walking into a police station. He couldn't see what purpose turning himself in would serve anyway. Surely it would be better, he reasoned, just to make sure he started to live a more productive life?

Nilsen's solution for how to live with himself was to 'become a workaholic', throwing himself into his trade union work at the civil service union, the CSPA. By the end of 1979, he had now been the Denmark Street Branch Secretary for over a year and, in meetings, Nilsen felt energised by the socialist idealists.

On 12 August 1979, after disposing of Holmes' body, Nilsen felt back in control. He started going back to the West End bars, getting drunk and talking to strangers. One Saturday in October, he met Andrew Ho, a young Chinese student. They met outside an arcade in Leicester Square near where Nilsen first met Hunter-Craig. After a couple of drinks in a pub, they returned to Melrose Avenue. They drank some more and then the young man initiated a conversation about bondage.

Nilsen claims Ho soon made it clear he wanted money, but that he wasn't interested in paying for sex. Another idea began to form in his mind; he told Ho to sit still while he bound his feet together. With his feet immobile, Nilsen went to his cupboard and produced a tie. Ho started to scream, and struggle. He broke loose, picked up his clothes and ran out of the house. Later, he called the police.

When they arrived at Nilsen's flat, he knew how to convince them that this had just been part and parcel of a lively homosexual encounter. In his memoirs, though, the confession is very casual: 'He was quite right – I did try to strangle him – but I was too sober to give it unbounded immoral force and he escaped the effort. Naturally, he didn't want to make a written statement or attend court.'

Despite the matter-of-fact way he talks about it, Nilsen claims to have been very concerned by the incident. Still, the shock wasn't enough to go make him abstain from alcohol again.

Much more alarming to him, though, seems to have been what happened just before Christmas – the murder of a young, bright, middle-class, apparently heterosexual tourist, with whom Nilsen had spent a friendly afternoon.

The killing of Kenneth Ockendon was an anomaly within Nilsen's overall pattern of victims. Other than the fact he would not have been immediately missed, everything else about the murder was an apparent departure from the normal modus operandi. Not only was Ockendon close to his family but, during the afternoon they had spent together, he made Nilsen feel good about himself by being interested in him. Whether it was this or, simply, because he feels it is expected of him, Nilsen makes more of a show of being upset by this murder than any other.

Kenneth Ockendon was a young Canadian on holiday. His parents, Ken senior, and wife Audrey, however, originally came from Croydon. Kenneth junior was born in February 1956, and was 14 when the family emigrated to the Toronto suburb Burlington in Canada. Ockendon's father soon found a job as a janitor; his son trained to be a welder.

By the autumn of 1979, he had been saving for months for a three-month adventure revisiting childhood haunts and catching up with friends and relatives. In September 1979, when he landed at Heathrow he was a young-looking, slight 23-year-old with shoulder-length dark hair that betrayed his

love of heavy rock music. This was the wildest thing about him. He drank and smoked in moderation, and his other main hobby was photography. Socially, he was polite and well mannered.

Ockendon's trip started with a visit to the Lake District with an old friend. He had plenty of money and made regular phone calls home. When he got down to London, he methodically ticked off all the relatives on his list. He was also in almost constant contact with his mother's brother, Gordon Gillies. Then on Monday, 3 December, Kenneth Ockendon disappeared, having spent the previous night in a small hotel in London's shabby King's Cross area.

Ockendon called Uncle Gordon at about 3.00pm that day. He said that he wanted to go back to Canada for Christmas, and could he come over on Wednesday, 5 December to pick up some cash being kept safely for him. During their conversation, Uncle Gordon could hear voices and music in the background, and asked where he was. He replied it was the Princess Louise, an ornate Victorian pub that apparently had live jazz. There wasn't, however, a band playing until the evening. Ockendon was standing at the bar when Nilsen came over and started asking about his camera.

Ockendon's failure to pick up the money from his uncle was so out of character, Gordon made a mental note to bring it up with Kenneth's mother the next time they spoke. As Christmas approached, still no one had heard from Ken. The police were then called in. Foul play was soon suspected. Having paid for another night at the hotel in advance, it was clear he had intended to stay longer. Moreover, his property was still there, including a pub guide and a diary from which they were able to trace his various movements up to the day he disappeared.

The following February, Ockendon's parents flew into London. At a press conference, they declared they were, 'staying here as long as it takes to find Ken'. The police warned them to be prepared for the worst, but they refused to give up hope. Posters were circulated around the capital and the disappearance was featured in an episode of *Police 5*, which Nilsen later told detectives he saw. He doesn't, however, describe any sense of anguish at seeing the parents' TV appeal.

Nine months on, Ken and Audrey were still placing more advertisements in newspapers carrying financial rewards for information. As late as

December 1982, on the third anniversary of his disappearance, fresh posters had been put up on notice boards in police stations across the capital.

In February 1983, a cigarette in hand, Dennis Nilsen told police what had happened to Kenneth Ockendon. He described how he had met him in the pub which he said was also popular with gay men. It was a day off for him. A remark Nilsen made about Ockendon's camera started the conversation but, soon, they also chatted about music and where Nilsen's sister lived in Toronto. At about 3.00pm, Nilsen suggested that he take the young man on a tour of London landmarks where he could get some nice photographs. They went down to Trafalgar Square, The Mall and over to the Houses of Parliament.

As it began to get dark, Nilsen again mentioned his large record collection. He persuaded him to come back to his flat, where they listened to Rick Wakeman, The Who's *Tommy*, and the Royal Philharmonic's *Hooked on Classics*. While Ockendon had the headphones on, Nilsen knocked up a quick ham, egg and chips. After they ate, they went to the off licence to get some rum and beer.

Then they settled in for the evening. Nilsen was thrilled by the young man's company and how he seemed to find him interesting. Ockendon had an open nature and was no doubt enjoying meeting someone new. He had become used to making quick friendships from the hostels and small hotels he had been staying in, and 'Des' seemed like someone whose company he would fondly remember at the end of the trip.

If there was a moment when Nilsen decided Ockendon represented a second opportunity to make a sex fantasy real, he doesn't say. He just told police it was about 1.00am that he found himself tightening the headphone cord around Ockendon's narrow neck. He was shouting, 'Let me listen to the music as well.'

Ockendon didn't struggle. Nilsen then quietened down the dog – 'Shut up, Bleep … this is fuck all to do with you!' – and he put her out. The headphone flex was untied and a Bacardi was poured. Then he stripped and washed the body and placed it in his bed. He poured himself more to drink and listened to all the records again. Finally, he went to bed and kissed and caressed the body. When he woke in the morning, he says he 'noticed' the person next to him was cold.

Ockendon was now what Nilsen calls a ‘prop’ in his fantasy. To satisfy the requirements of the fantasy, Nilsen needed to remove any reminder of who the person had once been. He wrapped all his victims’ possessions in bin bags and put them out for the dustman. The body was placed in a cupboard, and off he went to work. At lunchtime, he bought a cheap Polaroid camera.

When he returned, he removed the body from the cupboard, lay it out on the bed, and used up his 15 instant prints, creating a permanent record of his acts. Then he got in bed and placed the naked, dead body on top of him. He says he watched TV in this position. He talked to the body, and cried in appreciation of its beauty. His behaviour was, in plain language, insane.

After the ‘ritual’ was over, his behaviour became more rational. The next day, he collected all the albums they had listened to together, took them out to the garden and smashed them with a spade.

Some days later, Nilsen showed a similarly extreme reaction towards the same music tracks that he’d listened to that night with Ken Ockendon. Nilsen was on the organisation committee for his office Christmas party, and had been largely responsible for organising and cooking for about 80 people. He had found such responsibility a huge honour and prepared very carefully, including making tapes of any music he felt might be appropriate. But he forgot that the tapes he had prepared included many tracks he had enjoyed with Ockendon, including *Hooked on Classics*. When the music came out of the speaker, he was shocked. His face turned white, he poured his drink away and went outside for air.

Once back in his flat, reality and fantasy again became blurred. Nilsen removed the body, sat it on a chair and played the music that he’d brought back from the party, while drinking himself into a stupor.

Nilsen’s third victim was Martyn Duffey, born on 6 July 1963 in Birkenhead near Liverpool. He was murdered sometime between 13 and 19 May 1980, and was not yet 17. Duffey’s parents, Roy and Patricia, had divorced a few years earlier. At 15, he left school only to find there were few unskilled jobs left in the Merseyside ship industry. He began to get into trouble, being caught stealing and threatening other boys. One day he walked out of the house, hitch-hiked to London and slept rough for a week.

When he eventually turned up at the Soho Project, a homeless charity, they paid for him to return home.

Prior to his final disappearance, Duffey had been seen by a number of psychiatrists and social workers. He kept up a correspondence with one in particular. Despite his drug taking and casual gay sex, she helped him to complete a catering course and get a girlfriend. 'Above all else,' she warned, 'stay away from London.'

Duffy ignored this advice. When he met Nilsen, he was sleeping rough around Euston station. When he spoke to police, Nilsen remembered it was the day he had returned from a union conference in Southport but couldn't remember the precise date. He would have seen a trip to the station as an opportunity to look for the young runaways that hung around that area. Having just been up in Merseyside, he would also have had plenty to talk to Duffey about. Nilsen can't remember much about their conversation back at his flat, other than the fact that Duffey was extremely exhausted. After only had a couple of cans of beer, Duffey said he had to go to bed.

In *Killing for Company*, Nilsen says Duffey was lying on the top-bunk platform: 'I remember sitting astride him (his arms must have been trapped by the quilt). I strangled him with great force in the almost pitch darkness with just one side-light on underneath. As I sat on him, I could feel my bottom becoming wet. His urine had come through the bedding and my jeans.'

Nilsen then carried the body down from where he had strangled him. Duffey was still just alive. He took him to the kitchen, filled the sink and drowned him. The body was then moved to the bathroom. He stripped both himself and the dead youth and then sat in the bath with him. Then the body was hoisted on his shoulders and carried back up to the bed. In *History of a Drowning Boy*, Nilsen comments that it was the youngest-looking body he had seen. That was a turn-on.

Afterwards, Nilsen put the body in a cupboard and, another two days later, the floorboards came up again. In a perfectly rational act of covering up his tracks, Nilsen threw Duffey's chef's knives away, having first let them rust so they wouldn't attract attention (sloppily, he also forgot to throw all of them out). He also found a left-luggage tag in Duffey's pocket and went down to Euston to retrieve and dispose of the property – an old suitcase.

By the middle of 1980, Nilsen was becoming less emotional about being a murderer. He would later tell psychiatrists that seeing a fresh body now panicked him no more than going on patrol in Aden. But he has never spoken about what made him give in to his urges once he had picked someone up.

At Hornsey Police Station, he spoke of the killings as if they had simply happened without input from his conscious mind. 'I've killed people,' he said, 'but I can't understand why those people. There's no common factor … when I voluntarily go out to drink, I don't have the intention at that time to do these things … they're not fore-planned … I seek company first, and hope everything will be all right.'

After 30 years of reflection, he hasn't got much further with understanding the mechanics of what happened on any of those fateful nights. Either that, or he doesn't want to say. The closest we get are a number of statements that imply that, when he was feeling low, seizing an opportunity to satisfy his sex ritual temporarily relieved him of his feeling of inadequacy.

Nilsen's vague analyses contrast with an internal prison report written in 2000. This attempted a slightly more clinical analysis of the psychological factors that enabled Nilsen to kill. The authors listed them as: (1) development of deviant sexual fantasies leading to enactment; (2) poor behavioural controls further disinhibited by alcohol; (3) breakdown in an intimate relationship; (4) emotional detachment employed as a maladaptive coping strategy; (5) callousness and lack of empathy.

The report, written for a probation review, annoyed Nilsen so much that he produced a very lengthy 'rebuttal' report of his own called 'Anatomy of an Official Conclusion', in which he downplays the idea of deviant sexual fantasising, and rejects the idea that he's 'compartmentalising' in a way that is different from every other member of society:

> *It is not the deviant sexual fantasy which leads to enactment, but the addiction to the ritual. A fantasy is a set of ideas in the mind. The ritual is no fantasy – it is real … The fantasy images themselves were not images of enacted violence … What was outrageously abnormal was how the images were translated into reality on the ground. What*

was callousness and lack of empathy was then only true within the trance of the ritual …

… Most people compartmentalise different areas of their lives. One separates one set of interests and relationships from other sets. A man may belong to a football supporters' peer group that is distinct and separate from his workplace peer group and from his family unit. It's … how we all function in the community … the notion of compartmentalisation (as) somehow special and unusually directly related to my past offending is spurious. Emotional detachment … is an acquired trait or coping strategy development.

This statement is not very clear. Nilsen's evasive language threatens to obscure the meaning. What he seems to be saying in the first passage is that he sees a distinction between his sex fantasies which, in themselves, were relatively benign, and his compulsion to act these fantasies out by acquiring 'passive bodies'. He accepts that the ritual was callous but thinks that it happened in a kind of 'trance' over which he had little control.

As for the aftermath of the killings, Nilsen thinks the way he dealt with the bodies was within the range of what a normal person might do when faced with an extraordinary set of circumstances. It did not, he thinks, represent a pathological detachment nor indicate there was anything inherently wrong with him.

Throughout 1980, Nilsen continue to function normally at work and in union activities, but he was now increasingly likely to murder at night. In August, Billy Sutherland, whom Nilsen met in a gay pub in Soho, became his next victim. He was a 25-year-old father of one and, allegedly, an occasional male prostitute.

Sutherland had grown up in a slum estate in the north of Edinburgh, surrounded by drug dens. Six years before he met Nilsen, he moved into a flat with a girlfriend, Donna, who soon gave birth to their daughter. When the girl was three, he decided to move to London. Donna joined Billy for a while but soon missed home. When she returned, Billy stopped calling. It struck her as very out of character.

When reports of Nilsen's activities hit the news in 1983, Donna immediately felt this was the reason why he hadn't been in touch. She

called Billy's father, who contacted the police. In Hornsey, the detectives showed a photograph to Nilsen. He nodded his head to indicate he had killed Sutherland. He couldn't remember much more, however, than the fact he had strangled him from the front with his bare hands.

Between August 1980 and September 1981, Dennis Nilsen murdered between five and eight young men. He attempted to murder at least one more – Douglas Stewart, the man whom Gordon Honeycombe had met in Soho. Nilsen's memory of this period is poor, but there's no reason to disbelieve the general pattern of behaviour described to the police. This would involve drinking and listening to music with the victim, followed by sudden, impulsive murder. Over the following few days, Nilsen would admire, masturbate over and talk to the body.

Nilsen's manuscript makes some additional confessions. He says that he would shave any body hair from the bodies to make them conform to his physical ideal. He elaborates on the thrill of dressing them up. Sometimes, he wished he'd had lipstick. He did have talcum powder and this he used to make them smell nicer and, ironically, to make them look more alive. When he picked up the limp bodies, he would become extremely aroused and have to masturbate.

When he talks about what he did with the dead bodies, he wonders again if this excitement at holding the dead, limp bodies derived from being carried and washed by his mother and grandmother. Nilsen, however, has no definitive explanation as to how these 'infantile connections' worked their way into his sexual composition.

He is much clearer about what he isn't than what he is. He is not a 'lust murderer', like Paul Kürten, the 'Vampire of Düsseldorf' to whom he was compared in *Killing for Company*. He says he never derived a direct, sexual thrill from the actual act of murder. Time and time again, Nilsen repeats the purpose of the attacks – to acquire a lifeless body. To illustrate this, he says that to find the bodies attractive he would pretend he had stumbled upon the scenario, and ignore the fact that he had killed them. He even claims that if he had had access to a 'knock-out drug', he mightn't have killed them at all. But, of course, we know that most of his victims were already significantly incapacitated through alcohol.

Besides, common definitions of 'lust murder' do match Nilsen's activities. They include deriving satisfaction from playing with dead bodies,

and a fascination with dead genitalia. Nilsen clearly enjoyed interacting physically with dead bodies. *History of a Drowning Boy* also reveals for the first time that Nilsen would have liked to have kept some of the body parts as trophies. He says he would have particularly liked to keep the genitals, if he'd had a suitable liquid in which to preserve them.

'Lust murder' is closely related to necrophilia. Nilsen again, specifically denies being a necrophiliac. Other than on one occasion where he confesses to have had sex between a corpse's buttocks, he denies ever having had penetrative intercourse with any of the bodies. He does, however, say he would occasionally sexually abuse men who had passed out drunk in his flat. Interfering with a limp, unconscious body, however, was not sufficient to fulfil the main fantasy. That still required a dead body.

Finally, Nilsen is adamant he never ate any of the bodies of those he did kill. He thought about feeding some chunks to the dog as they looked strikingly like beef, but he didn't trust that the bodies didn't carry disease. Indeed, one of the corpses in the flat was later found to be carrying the Hepatitis virus.

In Hornsey Police Station, Nilsen confessed he'd killed 12 men in Melrose Avenue; he now claims the real figure was nine. His says he felt pressured by Jay and Chambers, and exaggerated as a result. When I told Peter Jay that Nilsen was now denying three of his victims, Jay shrugged his shoulders and replied that he 'seemed pretty sure about them at the time'. He then retrieved the list of victims the police had compiled from Nilsen's interviews. The list of those murdered at Melrose Avenue was as follows:

1. *Irish youth* (between 17 and 19 years old). 5ft 6in. Met Nilsen 29 Dec 1978. (Now known to be Stephen Holmes.)
2. *Kenneth Ockendon* (23). 5ft 8in. Met Nilsen 3 Dec 1979.
3. *Martyn Duffey* (16). 6ft 1in. Met Nilsen 17 May 1980.
4. *Billy Sutherland* (26). 5ft 9in. Met Nilsen Aug 1980.
5. '*Irish labourer*' (between 27 and 30 years old). 5ft 9in. Met Nilsen October 1980 in the Cricklewood Arms. He was tall with rough hands, and wore an old suit. Now denied.
6. '*Mexican or Filipino*' (20s). 5ft 10in. Met Nilsen November 1980 in the Salisbury Arms in St Martin's Lane. Slim and looked like a

gypsy. Possibly a rent boy.

7. '*Vagrant*' (20s). Met Nilsen late autumn 1980, at closing time at the top of Charing Cross Road. He was emaciated, with a pale complexion, and had many teeth missing. He wore a trench coat and outsize trousers. They took a taxi back to Melrose, where Nilsen strangled him in his sleep with a tie. He told police: 'I felt exhilarated on some kind of high. I put a tie around his neck and pulled it tight. His legs were like he was riding a bicycle. It was as easy as taking candy from a baby. I thought I was doing him a favour. I had the impression his life had been one of long suffering.'
8. '*Starving Hippy*' (late 20s). 5ft 11in. Met Nilsen October or November 1980 in the West End around closing time. He wore bleached jeans and was strangled with a rope. Interestingly, Nilsen later wrote the following to Brian Masters: 'Long-haired hippy, why did I bring you back? I tremble at your death and permanent presence. I brush the hair from your eyes. I try to shake you alive. I want to say that I'm sorry and see you walk away. I try to inflate your lungs, hopelessly, but nothing of you is working at all.' Now denied.
9. '*18-year-old, blue-eyed Scot*' (18). Met Nilsen January 1981 in the Golden Lion in Soho. He wore a green tracksuit top and trainers. Nilsen told police he'd challenged him to an end-of-night drinking contest. He commented, 'End of night … end of drinking … end of person.'
10. '*Belfast boy*' (early 20s). 5ft 9in. Met Nilsen February 1981 somewhere in the West End. He was slim.
11. '*Skinhead*' (about 20). 5ft 5in. Met Nilsen April or May 1981 at a street food stall in Leicester Square. He was muscular, with tattoos on his arm and 'Cut Here' beside dotted lines on his neck. He wore a black leather jacket, a studded belt, boots and a T-shirt. Nilsen told police he hung his torso up for 24 hours. Now denied.
12. *Malcolm Barlow* (23). 5ft 7in. Met Nilsen 18 December 1981.

Malcolm Barlow was the last victim to die in Melrose Avenue. Like Sinclair, his troubled life epitomised the tragedy of many of the victims. Barlow was the kind of vulnerable youth whose problems caused him to slip through every net. He was born in 1957 in Rotherham near Sheffield,

and from an early age he suffered from epilepsy. He was 11 when his mother died; afterwards, he was looked after by his sister Doreen. She soon found him unmanageable. He would lie, steal and, occasionally, sleep with men and then try to blackmail them. When he became too much for his sister to cope with, he started to move from squat to hostel, funding himself through benefits.

On Thursday, 17 September 1981, when Nilsen left the house on his way to work, he found Barlow slumped against a garden wall a few houses down from his own. He asked him what was up. Barlow said his epilepsy pills had made him feel faint. 'You should have someone professional look at you,' said Nilsen. He insisted Barlow come back to 195 Melrose to sit down. After some time, Barlow still looked ill, so Nilsen walked down the road to the phone box – his own phone was disconnected – and called an ambulance.

The following evening, when Nilsen returned from work, Barlow was sitting on his doorstep. Barlow said he'd been discharged and had nowhere to go. Nilsen thought this was a nuisance but still invited him in. He cooked some food, and plonked himself in front of the TV with a Bacardi and Coke. Barlow asked if he could have one, too. Nilsen says he questioned whether he should really be drinking whilst taking pills, but Barlow, apparently, insisted.

After a couple of drinks, Barlow fell unconscious. Nilsen was both annoyed to think he might have to go out to the phone box and get another ambulance, and concerned that the police might become involved. He thought about his options for about 20 minutes, and then killed him. He doesn't remember it well nor talks about it in his manuscript.

The murder of Barlow provided Nilsen with the last body to dispose of at Melrose Avenue. This was September 1981. Ever since the summer of 1980, Nilsen had been getting rid of the evidence in a series of unthinkably gruesome ceremonies. Three rotting bodies under the floorboards had been causing flies to buzz all around the house. Even with deodorants under the boards and insecticide sprayed twice a day, it was like a scene from a horror film.

Initially, Nilsen was content to simply get the bodies out of the house. He wanted to re-inter them in the garden shed he had built for Bleep. To do

this, he decided he should cut them up and then transport them piece by piece in old suitcases left by a previous tenant. It was a warm summer Sunday afternoon when he started. He placed the bodies on the small stone floor between the cooker and the fridge. The sight in front of him was so disgusting he wasn't clear what needed to be done next. The smell was atrocious; some heads had maggots crawling out of eye sockets and mouths. He says he began quickly to knock back some Bacardi and Coke. He is keen for the world to appreciate how unpleasant he found the act of dismemberment.

In truth, however, despite what he says, the drinking didn't quite come first. Before he could start, he needed to masturbate next to the victims. We know this from interviews with psychiatrists before his trial. He told them that masturbating was his way of saying 'goodbye'. After the symbolic gesture, he then poured his drink, put Bleep outside, and fetched his sharpest kitchen knives and some bin liners.

He then stripped off. Naked and drunk, with plastic sheets all over the floor, he hacked away at the corpses using the techniques he had learnt as a chef. He pulled flesh off the bones, snapped joints and severed spines. Even with a butcher's training, this was a difficult, physical process. Every so often, he says, he would be sick in the sink. Occasionally, he would cut himself. The French windows in the living room provided a draught of fresh air but he didn't walk out to them to avoid treading any human remains around the living room.

Heads were put in the large cooking pot (the same that had been used at the Christmas party) and, when the job was done, the foul-smelling viscera were put in plastic bags in a space between the double fencing for what he would later call the 'wee beasties of the night'. Soon, they rotted away to nothing. The suitcases were put in the shed with a number of deodorants. Eventually, a low wall was built around it, and more bricks and debris piled on the cases.

Between August and November 1980, Nilsen killed three more men. With the other bodies now in the shed, he had room to place these under the floorboards. He did so in a very chaotic manner. In fact, apparently, on one occasion he forgot about a body in a cupboard and was only reminded when he opened the door.

In December, Nilsen decided to draw a line under his activities by lighting another massive bonfire. On a freezing Saturday, he set about building a 5ft-high pyre. Between the end of Nilsen's garden and the next street was a small patch of waste ground. He found some discarded furniture there and carried it over. Nilsen broke up the furniture and wood and then arranged the pieces into a 2ft-deep base. Then he made another 3ft ring out of other timber he'd collected. When he was sure that the bodies would fit in the middle, he went out to the pub.

The next morning, he got up at 6.30am. He went outside to check there was no one around. As the garden was not particularly private, Nilsen had to rely on the neighbours keeping themselves to themselves. He prised the floorboards up and the bodies wrapped in carpets were taken outside. It took all his strength to lift them. Even though it was freezing cold, he was sweating. Next, he pulled the door off the shed and shone his torch in there. The cold had caused most of the flies to die; their bodies lay like a carpet on the cases. Elsewhere, there was a sticky fluid. The cases at the top were intact but those below had started to disintegrate.

By dawn, the bodies were within the makeshift wooden pyre which was now covered with tyres, and doused with paraffin. He lit it and then spent the day watching it burn. Throughout the day, he had the French windows open and played Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. From time to time, he would go out to inspect the bonfire. In a letter to Brian Masters, he said it was like a Viking ship going to Valhalla. He told the police: 'The fire burned extraordinarily fiercely. There were spurts, bangs, crackles and hisses. This I took to be the fat in the bodies burning.' Nilsen also says that children prodded the fire, but although there was a playground nearby, it's unlikely they could have got that close.

By burning all evidence, Nilsen claims to have felt able to start over. If there was no evidence, how could he even be sure that it had really happened? There was nothing but ash. In truth, however, he hadn't really eradicated all the signs. The other reminders – such as medallions, bracelets, watches and tobacco tins – just didn't bother him as much. He would happily wear or give away items from the dead, whom he considered, before their bodies were destroyed at least, to be 'part of the household'. Some items were found by police in 23 Cranley Gardens.

After the fire, Nilsen brought back a ‘pick-up’ from a pub in St Martin’s Lane. They had some sexual contact, and later he left. This encounter made him feel he was capable of normal, spontaneous activity. Such moments may even have been partly what he had in mind when he told me in a letter: ‘[Masters] writes me as cold and seemingly indifferent as his own prose style. I had, in my life, days of sun, colour and laughter, but you will search long and hard without spotting them in a tome constructed to describe my monstrosity and never the humanity along the road of events.’

There were no other ‘rays of sunlight’ in 1981. Between January and April of that year, he killed an Irishman, a Scotsman and, probably, an English skinhead. And yet, even with this prolific murder rate, he only occasionally missed work. He had an extraordinarily hardy constitution. Hunter-Craig told me that around this period Nilsen would happily drink all night, and then get up to go to work without trouble.

When he reached the office, he simply got on with the task in hand. But now he did so increasingly begrudgingly. He was unhappy about an ongoing problem he had with the promotion panel. Nilsen had, around this time, been told in a letter from the panel that he was not eligible to work for the Overseas Workers Section at Denmark Street because his manner with colleagues was ‘usually outspoken and often overbearing’. His superiors were concerned this might also manifest itself with the public.

He felt the letter constituted a smear on his name. But it was more a sign that the disturbance just beneath the surface was beginning to show. But it wasn’t until the summer of 1981 that his emotional problems really started to take over. The drinking became increasingly reckless and, during stupors, he would invite opportunist thieves back. He says he was also ‘gay-bashed’ which, undoubtedly, would have further soured him against the world. This culminated one night in Nilsen walking back from the Cricklewood Arms and then being mugged. His best jacket, shoes and wallet were taken. The wallet contained £300, a month’s wages to Nilsen. In other incidents, Nilsen lost his beloved movie camera and projector.

Finally, the stress came to a head and the civil servant collapsed at the end of Melrose Avenue. He thought he may be having a heart-attack and staggered to a phone box and called an ambulance which took him to Park Royal Hospital. He was kept under observation for a day. The doctors told

him, however, that that there was nothing physically wrong with him. He was simply suffering from extreme stress and exhaustion.

In the end, however, it was simple disagreement with the landlord that caused Nilsen to leave Melrose Avenue. The landlord was fed up with the electricity meters being constantly forced – the acts of Nilsen's 'guests' – with no explanations given. The rent was often late, and there were complaints about the awful smells coming from his flat. Nilsen had already had an inkling that there was a plan to evict him. On two occasions, he says he came back to find foreign-looking men outside, who said they had instructions from the landlord to inspect the flat. Nilsen took this as intimidation, and said so in a letter to Leon Roberts of Ellis and Co.

One day in June, Nilsen returned from work to find that the entire flat had been vandalised. Almost everything he owned, including his music collection and his record player, was either smashed or covered in creosote. The same thing had happened in the flat upstairs. Bizarrely, Nilsen called in the police. The culprit was never found. Now left with only the suit he wore and with no one else to complain to, Nilsen told his colleagues about what had happened. They had had a whip round and, two weeks later, presented him with a cheque for £85. Nilsen was overwhelmed. He wrote a letter saying how a cynic such as he 'seems to know the price of everything and the value of nothing'. The letter ended with a quote: 'Sympathy is a supporting atmosphere, and in it we all unfold easily and well.'

In August, the heat had brought the smell and the flies back. Nilsen knew he needed to act soon – he decided on another bonfire. As before, he dismembered the bodies first. The process was even more revolting than before. There were more maggots and more effluent. The bags of viscera were put into the same gaps in the fence. He boiled the flesh off the skulls in the pot he'd used before. This time, he couldn't use the shed as a storage facility as he'd burnt the door hoping he'd never have to use it again. Instead, he packed the other body parts with soil and deodorants and placed them back under the floorboards, waiting for the right moment.

It was approximately a month later that Nilsen killed Malcolm Barlow. That created another problem of storage – there was no longer any room under the floorboards. He stuffed the body in a space under the sink. Shortly afterwards, a letter from the landlord's agent arrived on the doormat

saying that they needed to take possession of the flat. They could offer him a place in Cranley Gardens and £1,000 compensation.

Nilsen started to build his last fire two days before he was due to move. The next day, it burned brightly. In the morning, the removals van arrived. For the second time, he could try to start again as if none of this had ever happened.

9

CRANLEY GARDENS

That awful, never-to-be-forgotten smell of decomposing human flesh was obvious. I looked at Nilsen and said. 'Your drains were blocked with human remains,' and with a deadpan face he said, 'Oh my God, how awful!'
DCI PETER JAY

On a misty autumn day, Dennis Nilsen climbed into the cab of a small removals van and, no doubt, with a few overbearing words of advice about the route, travelled the few short miles over to Muswell Hill. 'Driving away,' he told Jay and Chambers, 'was a great relief.' The destination, Cranley Gardens, mainly comprised respectable family houses. It was situated on a steep slope with grand views at the top. Number 23 was, however, for short-term renters with low horizons. According to the neighbours, from time to time there had even been virtual down-and-outs and squatters on the middle floor.

This would be Nilsen's home for 16 months. During that time, Nilsen murdered three young men, and attempted to kill at least five others. When he arrived on 5 October 1981, though, he appears to have hoped that a change of scenery could cure him of his 'addiction' to murder. It was not blind optimism. He was now living somewhere where the disposal of bodies would prove very difficult. Not only was there a shared garden, but even to get a body that far involved two flights of stairs. And, as Nilsen had never learnt to drive, there was no means of easily transporting the remains of victims away from the area.

The other tenants living in Number 23 found Nilsen eccentric but not out of keeping with the sort of people you might expect for that house. The occasional guests that Nilsen would receive, such as Hunter-Craig, noticed the new flat seemed a bit more Spartan than the last. But they also knew about the robbery at Melrose Avenue and that he was still replacing his

possessions. And at least this new flat was bigger with a much better kitchen.

As with Melrose Avenue, the flat comprised two main rooms – a bedroom and a living room. Off these were a galley kitchen and a bathroom. Both were built into the eaves and had prominent, sloping ceilings. Initially, Nilsen decided to live in the bedroom and sleep in the front. Later, he would do most of his living and sleeping in the back room. He soon replaced the stereo that had been stolen with a cassette player and bought a black-and-white TV. Along with his record collection, some posters (oddly including a page-three pin-up) and a couple of house plants, it soon became somewhere not entirely out of keeping with how one might expect a bachelor on a limited income to live.

The new flat was also in a much more genteel part of town than Cricklewood. If the weather was nice, it was just a 10-minute walk down to the Tube in Highgate. On cold winter days, or if Nilsen had had too much to drink, there was also a bus that could take him up the steep hill home. Without the depressing memories and smells of Melrose, he started to become more comfortable again about encouraging guests. Hunter-Craig remembers him saying, 'I like having you around Skip; it stops me doing naughty things.'

During the first few months at Cranley Gardens, Nilsen talks about experiencing varying levels of control over his urges. Without any actual killings, he still felt he was essentially winning the battle. But there were some near-misses.

In November, in Soho's Golden Lion, Nilsen approached an earnest young man called Paul Nobbs. He was a London University undergraduate reading Slavic studies, with thick, curly hair. At about 6.00pm, Nilsen had noticed Nobbs being aggressively chatted up at the bar, and intervened. Nobbs thought it a gracious thing to do. After a couple of drinks, they went back to Cranley Gardens to drink Bacardi, eat snacks and watch *Panorama*.

After watching the *Nine O'Clock News*, Nobbs phoned his mum from the payphone in the hall and said he'd be back later. An hour later, the Bacardi had started to take effect. Nobbs phoned again and said he'd now be back the next day. The pair went to bed. Nobbs says he tried to initiate sex, but Nilsen said he didn't 'do' penetration.

In the middle of the night, Nobbs awoke with a terrible pain in his neck and throat. In the bathroom, he saw his eyes were severely bloodshot. Nobbs was shocked and disorientated, but still had no idea he'd been attacked.

Nobbs went to the toilet, and then returned to the bed and quickly fell asleep. At 6.00am, he awoke again. In the bathroom mirror, he saw the bruising around his neck. He felt dazed.

Back in the bedroom, Nilsen was sitting upright. When Nobbs came in, he commented that the young man looked awful.

'Thanks very much,' replied Nobbs.

Nilsen asked what had happened. Nobbs shrugged his shoulders. Nilsen said he should go to see a doctor.

In hospital the worst was confirmed. Still, Nobbs didn't want to go to the police out of embarrassment. And he was confused. After all, Nilsen had seemed such a nice, reasonable man; why would he want to kill him? The injuries left him in bed for a few days.

Some weeks later, another incident occurred that gave Nilsen more comfort that he might be regaining control; he had found himself with a perfect opportunity to attack and yet didn't take it. At the end of a long night in a local pub, he had found a young man slumped against the bar. Nilsen took him home and let him sleep on his bed. He put the electric fire on and placed a blanket over him. He felt aroused and masturbated next to him but, still, didn't feel compelled to kill.

In *History of a Drowning Boy*, Nilsen speculates on the possible reasons. He thinks it might have been less to do with self-control, or even the amount he had had to drink – the usual reason why attacks went wrong – rather than a function of the precise details of his 'psychological addiction'. He explains that, that night, vital parts of his 'fantasy' were absent. Here, as with Carl Stottor, he says, there was no thrill to be got from 'rendering' the young man passive; he was already passed out. Whatever the real reason, the fact that the potential victim walked out of his flat probably came as some relief. There would be no more murders for four months.

Christmas 1981 was, still as lonely and self-pitying as ever; Nilsen doesn't talk much about this period. But a letter found in his flat at the time of the

arrest – and now the copyright of Brian Masters – tells us something of his feelings during that period:

> *Dear Mum,*
> *Just my (annual) note to keep you, at last, informed that I am still alive and reasonably well. I've moved into a new flat (self-contained) on Friday. It's more expensive than my last one (with much better facilities). I still have the dog (now six years old) and still function as an employment officer and trade-union branch secretary.*
>
> *I hope everyone is keeping well. I am sure you will agree with me that it is easy to lose touch when we are living in two different worlds, 500 miles apart. Love, Des*

By 'reasonably well', Nilsen meant coping with his loneliness by seeking out others with equally chaotic lives. He found them in his usual haunts – the bars of Soho and the West End. This was how he met the man who, months later, would be the victim of his first murder in Cranley Gardens.

John Howlett, 28, was 5ft-10in tall with an impressive physique. He was the son of an electrical inspector from High Wycombe who had left home as a teenager. To support himself, he would take on casual work, his favourite being helping out in travelling fairgrounds. But when they first met in a Soho pub, Howlett told him he had been a Grenadier Guardsman. He seemed an unlikely military man but, then again, so was Nilsen.

In March 1982, their paths crossed again. 'John the Guardsman' recognised Nilsen standing at the bar of the Salisbury pub on St Martin's Lane. He approached him, explaining he was down from High Wycombe for the day. After a few drinks, Nilsen suggested they move back to his flat via the off-licence. Nilsen cooked a meal and they watched television and drank until late. When the late film started, Howlett said that he was tired and asked if Nilsen minded him getting some rest. Nilsen did mind, but Howlett went to lie down anyway. Around midnight, when the film had finished, Nilsen went into the next room and found Howlett in his bed.

'I didn't know you were moving in,' he said with a scowl. He suggested calling a taxi, but Howlett just grunted. Nilsen went back next door, poured himself a drink and had a think. He didn't like Howlett, nor did he find him attractive.

Nilsen's police confessions state he killed Howlett simply because he was an inconvenience. It was a fiercely brutal attack; the only account he ever gave that contained a convincing description of the violence of murder. He told Chambers and Jay:

> *Summoning up all my strength, I forced him back down and his head struck the rim of the head-rest on the bed. He still struggled fiercely so that now he was half off the bed. In about a minute, he had gone limp. There was blood on the bedding. I assumed it was from his head. I checked and he was still breathing deep, rasping breaths. I tightened my grip on him again around his neck for another minute or so. I let go my grip again, and he appeared to be dead.*
>
> *I stood up. The dog was barking in the next room. I went through to pacify it. I was shaking all over with the stress of the struggle. I really thought he was going to get the better of me. I returned and was shocked to see that he had started breathing again. I looped the material round his neck again, pulled it as tight as I could and held on for what must have been two or three minutes. When I released my grip, he had stopped breathing.*

History of a Drowning Boy doesn't tell us any more about this attack, other than to imply that he exaggerated the above confession under pressure from Chambers and Jay.

There is no good reason to believe that, but there is cause to believe that killing in a location where, with no obvious way to dispose of the body, marked another level of psychological decline. Still, despite the situation he found himself in, once out of the flat, Nilsen reverted more than ever to his persona of a finicky and indignant complainer.

Nilsen has a number of anecdotes that, unintentionally, illustrate this. One was that, while walking Bleep one day, he found a body wrapped in a blanket on Highgate woods. Full of self-righteousness, he says he was shocked that there might be a murderer on the loose and called the police. It turned out to be a dead dog.

Further clues to Nilsen's state of mind during this period are to be found in an unsent letter Nilsen wrote to his union friend, Alan Knox. It was full of breezy chat about his new television and their shared political views. The

reason for writing the letter had been to prepare for a visit from Knox; and even while Nilsen's wardrobe contained a dead body that he had no idea what to do with, he was able to cheerfully write, 'Don't let the bastards get you down.'

Eventually, Nilsen decided that disposal of Howlett's body would best be done piece by piece. Three days after killing him, he moved the body out of the wardrobe, and brought it into the bathroom. Although he covered the floor with bin liners, the main dissection took place in the bath. Nilsen put a wooden board across it and then, with the body draped over this, the soft parts of the body were cut into pieces a couple of inches long and flushed down the toilet. But this process was too slow. To speed things up, Nilsen then started to boil the flesh and viscera down to a soup-like consistency. This seemed to allow the plumbing to cope better. When the head was soft enough, he scooped the brains out and flushed them, too. The larger bones were packed into bin liners in the wardrobe with salt and padding. While separating them, Nilsen broke several knives. The smaller bones were left out for the dustman.

After Alan Knox's visit, Nilsen was able to appear relatively relaxed and chatty in company. That was how Carl Stottor found him when they met one wet May evening. Even today, Stottor's most vivid memories of the night are still the pleasant hours they spent before the attack and how Nilsen had approached him while he sat alone in Camden's Black Cap pub, nursing half a pint. He remembers being able to confide how vulnerable he had felt with his previous, violent boyfriend. Stottor told Nilsen how he had felt unable to report how he had attacked him because, until the previous month, he had been under the gay age of consent –21 – and had been scared of attracting the attention of the authorities.

Not only did Nilsen have a comforting manner, he also reminded Stottor of his very first boyfriend. The stranger seemed sympathetic and kind. Even long after the attack, Stottor continued to believe that there had been a genuine connection between the two of them.

In the immediate aftermath, though, no one seemed to believe anything he had said. The police were dismissive and, when he told friends what he thought might have happened, they convinced him that he was getting confused with an earlier attack from his boyfriend.

When Stottor later wrote to Nilsen for answers, he was still finding it hard to remember all the details of the attack. He wrote in a spirit of open enquiry but shied away from divulging the full extent of his physical injuries: how after the attack he had needed to sleep constantly for almost a week, and the problems he still had with his lungs from the drowning.

Similarly, Stottor chose not to go into detail about the emotional breakdown and suicide attempt that followed the attack. The final thing he omitted to say was the bizarre discovery he'd made that 'John the Guardsman' – whose body had been in the wardrobe that night – was the same John Howlett he'd known from his own childhood. That coincidence made the trauma all the more personal.

The afternoon after letting Stottor walk free, Nilsen's mind would have soon turned to certain welcome developments with his job. The previous October, against all expectations, Nilsen had finally been awarded a promotion. There were no immediate positions available, so he was put on a waiting list.

Friday, 25 June 1982 would be Nilsen's last day at the Denmark Street branch of the Job Centre. In the late afternoon, he was given a gold pen, a lighter and the traditional card full of friendly comments, such as 'Keep up the talking', and 'Kentish Town may never be the same again'.

On the Monday, Nilsen took the Tube three stops to Kentish Town where his new position as Job Centre executive officer put him on a salary of £7,000. The new duties involved being a finance supervisor, a post supervisor and an accommodation and premises officer. It wasn't just the salary and status that were an improvement – his immediate superior, Janet Leaman, was the only person, he says, he ever had a warm working relationship with. Everything about this new job gave him a new sense of optimism.

There was still, however, also the fairly regular outbursts of temper. Hunter-Craig described him, during this period, as being like the 'little man' in whom unexpressed anger builds up. But at work this was largely compensated for by hard work and attention to detail. It was also a sympathetic environment. The women in the office felt that Nilsen was lonely and some suspected he was gay, and probably vulnerable.

One night after staying late in the office to help mop up a flood, Leaman gave him a packet of cigarettes as a thank you. She was struck by how he

gushed about how grateful he was for the token of gratitude. Some months later, at Christmas, he told her about a phone call from his mother. It seemed he needed a mother more than most.

During his last six months at Cranley Gardens, Nilsen stopped trying to contact his mother altogether. He was now totally resigned to being a murderer. Martyn Hunter-Craig thinks that, in his own cryptic way, he admitted as such. He remembers him saying, 'I know my life will be over in the Eighties,' although at the time he'd assumed Nilsen had meant *his* eighties.

In September 1982, Nilsen found Graham Allen the worse for drugs and trying to hail a cab in Piccadilly. Allen was a 28-year-old Glaswegian known to his friends as 'Puggy'. The man whom newspapers would characterise simply as a 'registered heroin addict and petty criminal' would become Nilsen's fourteenth victim. He was tall, rugged and heterosexual, with a girlfriend called Lesley and a son called Shane. Although Allen drifted in and out of his boy's life, Shane has clear memories of him, and grew up to look increasingly like his dad. But looks, and a fondness for drugs were, more or less, *all* Puggy gave Shane. Puggy was aggressive and uncultured, but Shane is relaxed and bookish. In his thirties, to help kick his own heroin habit, Shane moved from London to a village near Grenoble in the south-east of France. He still lives there, and supports himself with casual jobs in the civil service while trying to pursue a career in writing, which in the last couple of years has included his online presence: memoiresofaheroinhead.blogspot.co.uk

It was while researching pieces for his online journal that Shane found my *Sunday Times* article, which prompted him to contact me. After an email and phone exchange, he sent me a link to an essay he'd written about his father. He wanted me to be able to see that, for all Graham Allen's faults, Puggy was still his father. The essay starts: 'My father, Graham Archibald Allen, was born on 31 October 1954 in Motherwell, Scotland. The youngest of two, he grew up with attention problems and failed miserably at school. The only thing he excelled at was football. By the age of 15, he had discovered Glasgow, alcohol and cheap prescription drugs. By 17, he was out of school, out of pocket and out of home. Having been laid

off by the steel works in Motherwell and with nothing else for it, he made his way down south to London.'

After failing to find unskilled work, Shane says his father's options started running out. 'After making a few contacts, he was soon taking advantage of the lenient squatting laws of the time. With a roof over his head, it wasn't long before he was sucked into the sleazier side of city life. Cheap, strong booze and whatever pills were doing the rounds … [funding] his habit through a mixture of government unemployment money, begging, stealing and robbing tourists around London's West End.'

But then something changed in Allen's life. In 1972, he met Lesley Mead, a blonde, blue-eyed barmaid. Three years later, she gave birth to Shane. Over the next eight years, Mead spent her time oscillating between Allen and a small-time gangster called Ray. Shane's memories of growing up are of his father moving in and out of his life, and are reproduced here with kind permission from the author:

> *During the last five years of his life, my father was in and out of prison, in and out of rehab, and in and out of life. His living was hard and his addiction was harder – it was completely out of control ... If that wasn't enough, he was also halfway to becoming a chronic alcoholic…*
>
> [On the night of Allen's disappearance in 1982] *I remember him arguing with my mother and demanding money for heroin. He was drunk and cut and she had taken refuge inside the family house.* [His] *demands took place from outside, standing on the window ledge and shouting through the glass. He was hung up their like some perverse embodiment of Christ, black blood coming out his mouth where he'd punched his own face ... That was the last sight either my mother or I saw of him. Well, that and then finally climbing down before casually skipping the low garden wall and disappearing into the night. That image haunts my mother, and what haunts her even more were her very last words: 'Fuck off ... and NEVER come back!'*

Shane, later, adds, 'I know the relationship between my mother and father was violent and unhealthy, but it was still love, and as we know, love is … never a logical emotion.'

Graham Allen was last seen in September 1982. Shane and his mother think that, after the scene at the window, he walked off to find drugs. They think it not unlikely that he may have had a vague plan to pay for them by mugging a gay man who'd tried to pick him up. When Nilsen found him trying to hail a cab in London's West End, his dealer had probably already advanced a large hit of heroin. He had probably also been drinking. Allen was standing at the foot of Shaftesbury Avenue with blood on his jacket.

Nilsen told the police, 'The thing he wanted more than anything else was something to eat. I had very little supply in but I had a whole tray of eggs. So I whipped up a huge omelette and cooked it in the large frying-pan, put it on a plate and gave it to him. He started to eat the omelette. He must have eaten three-quarters of the omelette. I noticed he was sitting there and suddenly he appeared to be asleep or unconscious with a large piece of omelette hanging out of his mouth. I thought he must have been choking on it but I didn't hear him choking – he was indeed deeply unconscious.

'I sat down and had a drink. I approached him, I can't remember what I had in my hands now – I don't remember whether he was breathing or not but the omelette was still protruding from his mouth. The plate was still on his lap. I removed that. I bent forward and I think I strangled him. I can't remember at this moment what I used … I remember going forward and I remember he was dead … If the omelette killed him, I don't know, but anyway in going forward I intended to kill him. An omelette doesn't leave red marks on a neck. I suppose it must have been me.'

Until Allen was identified through dental records from a metal plate in his jaw, he was simply referred to by Nilsen as 'the omelette death'.

At least two men survived visits to Nilsen's flat between the murders of Allen and the final murder, that of Stephen Sinclair; the first was Trevor Simpson. Simpson's interviews from 1983 paint a clear picture of Nilsen's domestic situation during his last months as a free man.

They met on Wednesday, 22 December in a Soho pub. Simpson was 20 years old and had just served six months in jail for hijacking a car in Belgium. When Nilsen met him, he was stopping off in London en route to the Midlands. After a few drinks, Nilsen invited the young man back. As with Graham Allen, there was nothing homosexual about 'Trevor from

Derby'. On the first night, Nilsen slept in his room at the back, and told Simpson to settle himself in one of the armchairs in the lounge.

The next morning Nilsen told him he was welcome to stay a while. He took up Nilsen's offer for seven days, during which he was the recipient of a constant barrage of left-wing rhetoric, and suggestions they visit Marx's grave in Highgate Cemetery nearby. And, despite being struck by the smell, Simpson told police he wasn't tempted to look for its source.

Christmas came and went just like any other day. There were no cards or decorations, no special meal and no friends. On the sixth night, Simpson irritated Nilsen by being rude about a stew he'd cooked. At around midnight, Simpson remembered Nilsen, drunk, muttering about having to consult the 'professor' about whether he could stay – an odd expression that Hunter-Craig also remembers Nilsen using.

Simpson was fed up and went to sleep. At about 1.00am, he found the room filling with smoke. He ran out into the kitchen. Nilsen was nonchalantly drinking a glass of water. Back in the living room was a smouldering pair of jeans on the fire. Nilsen told Simpson he must have dropped a cigarette on it.

Nilsen's manuscript describes Simpson as the man he 'lusted over'. He goes over the thought processes by which he decided to try and asphyxiate him with the burning jeans: 'I thought of bashing him over the head with a blunt object but could not do it,' he says. 'I thought about stabbing him with a kitchen knife but couldn't do that either.' Nilsen then contemplated tying his legs together and then strangling him. But whether from cowardice or some other restraining impulse, he couldn't bring himself to attack Simpson physically. That was when he came up with the idea of the fire. Simpson stayed for another day and, when he left, Nilsen said he must come again.

Once Simpson had departed, Nilsen continued to drink heavily. It was now almost four years since the first murder. On New Year's Eve 1982, he started on the rum at lunchtime in a pub down the road. When the pub closed for the afternoon, he came home and by 8.00pm he was so drunk that he decided to invite Vivienne and Monique from downstairs to join him. Nilsen banged on their door, and slurred the invitation. The two girls politely but firmly declined.

Nilsen left, looking angry. He went upstairs and then out. Shortly after midnight, he returned. Ten minutes later, there was a commotion on the

stairs. Downstairs, the front door slammed. It was a young Japanese chef called Toshimitsu Ozawa. Nilsen thinks he met him at the Green Man pub down the road just before last orders. Ozawa told police later that night that, once in the flat, Nilsen had calmly approached him with his arms outstretched and a tie in between them. Nilsen's most vivid memory was of being kicked hard in the groin. In the end, no more was made of the incident.

It was another example of how recklessly out of control Nilsen was now becoming. In his manuscript, Nilsen lists several occasions when he came within a whisker of being arrested. The closest he had come to being discovered had actually been a year-and-a-half before, at Melrose Avenue, just after the last 'mass dissection'. Because of the 'revolting nature' of the task, Nilsen says he'd got 'practically legless' on Bacardi. He then went for a drunken walk to find somewhere to put the body parts:

> *I put as much of the viscera as could fit in a space between a board and the fence near the end of the garden. The other main fleshy parts of the bodies I wrapped into smaller packages and put back under the floorboards. The stench of decaying flesh was still, even while pissed out of my mind, bad enough to cause me to throw up periodically. When recalling what I had had to go through, the reader will think it odd that I can't stand the sight of human blood (which might explain why I could not use a knife on anyone).*
>
> *In this muddled haze of booze, I took it into my mind to take Bleep up to Gladstone Park for her daily romp. There I was with the mutt on a lead tottering over to the park with a plastic carrier bag with all the surplus entrails stinking to high heavens. I left the bag, in broad daylight, by the side of a road adjacent to the park.*

The bag was found by a biology student called Robert Wilson, who called the police. The remains were seen to be in an advanced state of decay and, then, there was no easy way to determine what exactly they had been. Nilsen still, however, wants to have a dig at the police. 'Had it been subjected to a closer examination by a qualified pathologist,' he says, 'then the alarm bells would have rang loud and clear to a death probably caused by foul play. My bloody fingerprints were all over the carrier bag and these

could have been matched with mine on file in a relatively short time. This omission prolonged my arrest by eighteen months and four deaths later.'

When Nilsen met Stephen Sinclair on Wednesday, 26 January, he says his 'addiction' to murder was all-consuming. Although he doesn't admit he targeted Sinclair, he cannot deny there was planning involved. A ligature made out of a tie and a piece of string was found in his flat. Nilsen says such preparation was just like an alcoholic planning his next drink. He felt powerless to resist.

After the arrest, Nilsen had said, 'I sometimes feel my sole reason for existence was the killing.' Now, he says, the 'fantasy ritual' was 'everything' to him. Even after killing Sinclair, he was finding new permutations on the same theme. He would place him on the bed and watch him slowly fall on to cushions.

A fortnight after Nilsen had been playing with the body of the young man whose life he had just taken, DCI Peter Jay, Inspector Steve McCusker and DC Jeff Butler were waiting out in the cold for him to return from work. The Duty Officer had said something 'odd' had been discovered in a drain. When he got there, Jay says, two things particularly concerned him – the discovery of what looked like pieces of human hand, and that the blockage seemed to go up the soil pipe to Nilsen's toilet.

Jay called in the Scenes of Crime Officer. He packaged up the findings and had them sent over to Professor David Bowen, a Home Office pathologist at Charing Cross Hospital in Hammersmith. At 2.00pm, Jay drove across town to Charing Cross. Bowen had not only established these were human body parts, but had also found a piece of neck bone with clear ligature marks on it. The victim had been strangled with great force. They drove back to the flat to await Nilsen. Jay told me:

> *When he finally walked through that door, I walked up to this smartly-dressed man in his thirties, noted his grey suit, metal-rimmed spectacles and scarf round his neck and said, 'Hello, I'm Detective Chief Inspector Jay from Hornsey CID. I've come about your drains.'*
>
> *I was almost pleased to see a wry smile appear on his face and he said, 'Since when have police been interested in blocked drains?'*

I told him I would tell him more once we got into his flat and he led the way. Glancing back at me once simply to ask about the identity of my two colleagues. 'Health Inspectors?' asked Nilsen.

'No ... detectives,' I replied. [Then Nilsen opened the door.]

That awful, never to be forgotten smell of decomposing human flesh was obvious. I looked at Nilsen and said, 'Your drains were blocked with human remains.'

And with a deadpan face, he said, 'Oh my God, how awful!'

That was his only expression of innocence because when I then said, 'Don't mess me about. Where's the rest of the body?' he immediately said, 'In plastic bags in the other room.'

That was it as far as I was concerned. I left Jeff Butler at the other door of Nilsen's flat and I drove the CID car back to Hornsey with Nilsen and Steve McCusker sitting in the bock. Steve suddenly popped a question to Nilsen out of the blue: 'Are we talking one body here, or two?' he asked.

'Neither,' said Nilsen. 'It's 16!' Nilsen then offered to tell us all about it back at the station.

Looking back at that bizarre encounter, both Steve McCusker and I would say that for some odd reason we automatically accepted that he was being truthful, incredible though it was. There was an honesty about the way he spoke to us.

Nilsen carried on talking in a calm, matter-of-fact, way. He seemed totally without remorse. He told the officers that if he hadn't been caught, he might have killed hundreds. He said that when the trigger in him was pulled, a bomb blast couldn't have stopped him. Peter Jay never thought he particularly look like he cared.

The police processed Nilsen as politely and efficiently as possible. A doctor and a photographer were ordered so that there could be no suggestion of ill treatment. Then the prisoner was brought a warm meal and a hot drink. Only then, with Professor Bowen in tow, did they return to Cranley Gardens.

It was now 9.00pm. The smell seemed worse than they'd remembered – a sweet, rotten stench made sharper by the cold. Two large, black bin bags were found in the wardrobe, and in one were four smaller bags. Peeking

into them, they could see two contained left and right sections of a man's torso, with the arm still attached. In the third bag was a much decomposed headless and armless torso. Finally, there was a Sainsbury's bag containing internal organs in a soup of body fluids. While it was all being bagged up, Jay stood by the door for air.

Back at the mortuary, the second large, black bag was seen to contain a man's head, boiled but with most of the hair and flesh still remaining. Another skull was found with most of the flesh removed, and another torso. Inside a tea chest, a curtain was wrapped around more bones, hands, feet and another skull. Behind plywood boxing in the bathroom was the lower half of Stephen Sinclair, clean cut from just above the waist and still intact.

Jay remembers the flat being extremely damp. Sleet was coming in the open windows, and electric fires were brought in to dry the place out. The damp made it impossible to dust for fingerprints for several days. Meanwhile, a crew was sent to Melrose Avenue. The floorboards were taken up and a tent erected in the garden. Soon, they found smashed skulls and pieces of bone. All that Forensics could determine at that stage, though, was whether the fragments were human or animal.

The police wanted as much information as they could get before making their initial charge: that of Sinclair's murder. After that, they could interview Nilsen at their leisure about the other murders. Although Nilsen says he remembers the police doing their job well enough, the more one reads his account, however, the stranger it seems. He says that, from the outset, he knew the police would 'require him to write their script'. This odd sentence seems not to be just a reference to the confessions he would give but also to how the story of the arrest would be told – that he would need to help create a story that would be told for posterity.

Nilsen also seems concerned to assert his superiority and let us know he wouldn't have made any mistakes. He finishes this section with an allegation that, before he was sent to Brixton, some junior officers asked for his autograph. He says he obliged, along with one of his 'one-liners', such as 'I don't have nightmares … I give nightmares'.

The police visited Nilsen in Brixton twice for further interviews. In total, they interviewed him 16 times for a total of over 31 hours, with 165 pages of questions and answers recorded in longhand. A word processor – the latest thing at the time – had been asked for and refused; complete sets of

notes would have to be written out by hand. Each interview was between two and two-and-a-half hours and all but the first couple conducted in the presence of Ronald Moss, Nilsen's first solicitor.

From the evidence gathered in these interviews, the team set about finding the victims. Without advanced forensics, CCTV and sophisticated computer databases, the police had to rely on personal items, fingerprints and dental records. Ironically, without DNA technology, the skeletal remains of Howlett and Allen found in the flat proved two of the hardest bodies to identify.

As in television dramas, the operations room was full of pin boards with photos and blackboards with leads scrawled over them. On one poster-sized piece of paper the investigating officers tried to fill in as many details about the victims as possible. The top row read: name; last known address; description; date missing; date of death; last seen by; how identified; exhibit numbers; statement numbers; and remarks.

Kenneth Ockendon was identified by a composite fingerprint created by the partial prints found on his *A-Z* London streetguide, and a camera light meter found in his hotel. Nilsen also recognised him from a photo. Sinclair was formally identified by fingerprints found on his leather jacket, his syringes, a tobacco tin and by his blue-and-white scarf. Billy Sutherland was identified by a photograph after his family had contacted police after seeing the news. Some of the personal items found in Nilsen's flat belonging to Martyn Duffey, such as kitchen knives, bore his name. The existence of missing boy called Martyn Duffey was soon established, but he turned out to be a different height from the one they were looking for and the search resumed.

The legwork involved in finding some victims seemed almost endless. In the case of John Howlett, the police first looked for all 'Johns' who had been in the Grenadier Guards, and then, when they realised that he might not have been in the Army, every John they could find in High Wycombe. Eventually, they narrowed their search down by finding his blood type in a strip of muscle tissue.

By the time of the trial, only seven names were filled out on the chart. The others were simply referred to by Nilsen's descriptions, such as 'the starving hippy' or 'the skinhead with the tattoo around his neck'.

10

THE TRIAL

At 4.25 pm on Friday, 4 November 1983, the state through the agency of the judicial system made its pronouncement on me. The anonymous jury, having gained its thrills and shocks from this theatre of the absurd, had finally, by a majority of 10-2, agreed with the prosecution's and judge's view of me and my past actions. The media would take up the clarion call of me as 'evil beyond belief'. The flashbulbs flashed and the wolves howled and in the universal public consciousness I joined the ranks of the damned alongside Crippen, Haigh, Brady, Hindley and Sutcliffe.
DENNIS NILSEN, IN *HISTORY OF A DROWNING BOY*

The trial of Dennis Andrew Nilsen started on the morning of Monday, 24 October 1983 at London's Central Criminal Court, otherwise known as the Old Bailey. It is an austere stone building topped with a statue of Justice with her scales and sword. As the court opened for its day's business, the clerk of the court read out eight charges against the 37-year-old defendant. These were the murder of Kenneth Ockendon, Malcolm Barlow, Martyn Duffey, John Howlett, Billy Sutherland and Stephen Sinclair, and the attempted murder of Douglas Stewart and Paul Nobbs.

Two charges were conspicuously absent – the crimes against Graham Allen and Carl Stottor. In 1983, the media reported that the details about these offences had come in after the court indictment papers had already been drawn up and evidence gathered. The judge had, therefore, ruled that it wasn't possible to include them. But both Stottor and Allen's wife, Lesley, remain incredulous that there wasn't still time to make some provision. They feel strongly that justice was denied them. Still, the attacks were included as general evidence of Nilsen's modus operandi and Stottor would have the opportunity to tell his story from the witness box.

The courtroom was packed to overflowing. When the press benches filled up, journalists moved to the public gallery. At the front sat Mr and Mrs Ockendon; just beneath them stood the man who had butchered their son. He was dressed neatly in a grey sports jacket, light-blue shirt, and blue

tie, which he had been loaned. Each time he was asked how he pleaded, he responded, ‘Not guilty’.

Nilsen had eventually decided on this plea after reading through psychiatric reports arranged by his solicitor at the time, Ralph Haeems. He told me that, after his initial scepticism, he became persuaded that his earlier ideas of pleading guilty were naïve. ‘There was a real diminishment of total responsibility,’ he wrote, due to the ‘personality dysfunction mechanisms to which I had slowly evolved from the bleakness of an emotionless child and early manhood.’

To support their plea of ‘diminished responsibility’, the defence produced two psychiatrists: James Mackeith and Patrick Gallwey. Mackeith had a reputation for being a reasonable and balanced man; he thought Nilsen suffered ‘severely’ from a number of personality disorders. He was also convinced they were, probably, untreatable, and that his grandiosity and inflated ego would render future psychological therapy futile. Gallwey agreed that Nilsen had a personality disorder, but he thought it was slightly different. He diagnosed Nilsen with a rare type of ‘borderline’ disorder which meant Nilsen’s mind moved between a seemingly normal position and a heavily ‘schizoid’ state, bordering on psychosis.

The prosecution said it was murder, pure and simple. Their psychiatrist, Paul Bowden, had met Nilsen in his first week in Brixton, and visited him regularly over the subsequent months. During that time, he concluded Nilsen was a plausible, cunning murderer who had been in full control of himself at the time of all the offences.

The prosecution case was led by Alan Green, QC. In *History of a Drowning Boy*, Nilsen is pleased to point out that Green would later become the Director of Public Prosecutions and then resign when accused of kerb-crawling in 1991. Green opened his case by outlining the day of Nilsen’s arrest and showing the jury photographs of the scene at the flat. He then explained more about the case they were about to hear. There would be six witnesses; the first three, he said – Stewart, Nobbs and Stottor – had all had first-hand experience of Nilsen trying to kill them. Next, there would be detectives Jay and Chambers, who had arrested and interviewed Nilsen. Finally, he said, they would hear from psychiatrist Dr Paul Bowden.

Green, wearing outsized, horn-rimmed glasses, spoke in a softly authoritative, theatrically understated manner. He began to outline Nilsen's modus operandi. He explained how he had killed men he met in public houses. They would go back to Nilsen's flat for more drink and then, at some point, Nilsen would squeeze the life out of them. He explained most of the victims were homosexual – some, in fact, male prostitutes – yet none had been killed because they were homosexual or had resisted Nilsen's advances. They were, he said, nearly all from the fringes of society and from outside of London; the kind of people whom Nilsen might feel would probably not be missed.

The murders were described one by one. The violence of the killings and indifference of the disposal were both emphasised. Particular attention was given to Malcolm Barlow – killed, apparently, because Nilsen didn't want to call an ambulance – and John the Guardsman who was strangled three times and then drowned. Green also made sure the jury knew about Nilsen's extraordinarily casual manner with the police.

The following day, the papers delighted in reporting some of Nilsen's idiosyncratic quips, such as 'I started out with 15 ties and now all I'm left with is a clip-on …' or his reply to Jay's question of how many bodies he'd had under the floorboards: 'I don't know, I didn't do a stock check.'

Nilsen's *History of a Drowning Boy* doesn't say more about the events of the trial than can be found in the press cuttings. It does tell us, however, a significant amount about Nilsen's attitude to confronting justice. One sketch he draws is full of disgust at the offensive intrusion into those aspects of his life that he had kept most private: 'The courtroom twitched nervously,' he says, 'to the sweaty gasps of guilt-ridden voyeurs hating and loving the dirt-filled revelations.' He then speculates how much more startled they might have been by the sight of 12 naked men appearing in front of them, as if he felt he'd actually experienced such a vision during the proceedings. Later, he mocks the way journalists jumped on a 'throwaway psychological cliché' he gave about assuming 'a quasi-God role'. He feels he was the only one who *really* understood what the trial was all about.

He was also highly irritated by the testimony of the first witness, Douglas Stewart, the man whom Gordon Honeycombe had met in Soho. Stewart, a 29-year-old Scotsman with thick, curly hair, took the stand

looking tall and confident. In his version of events, Stewart said he had met Nilsen one November in 1980, in the Golden Lion in Soho. He had gone there, he said, not because of its gay reputation but rather because it served his favourite Scottish beer.

On the night in question, he had been one of a group chatting at the end of the bar. When Nilsen had suggested that they go back to his flat, he'd thought the invite was for the whole group, and once in the street he thought it rude not to continue on to Melrose Avenue.

Back in Nilsen's flat, they started by drinking lager. 'Dennis', Stewart told the court, then offered him vodka which he refused. 'Suit yourself,' Nilsen replied, 'I am off to bed; you're welcome to join me.' Stewart explained he 'didn't do that sort of thing'. He then went to sleep in a chair. Approximately two hours later, he woke to find his feet tied to the legs with a neck tie. There was another around his neck and Nilsen's knee was pushed hard against his chest. Stewart said he started shouting and fighting. Nilsen shouted back, 'Take my money,' as if trying to suggest that there was a robbery was going on.

Nilsen then calmly told Stewart he could kill him, even though by now Stewart was in charge. After the struggle, things calmed down. They sat in silence. Then Nilsen went to the kitchen and came back with a large knife which he held calmly, unthreateningly. Eventually, the conversation started up again, the two men shared a drink together and Stewart left. Once at a safe distance down the road, Stewart called the police. They sent a squad car over. After speaking to both parties, they concluded that it had been a lovers' tiff, made some notes, apologised to Nilsen, and then left. All the time Stewart spoke, Nilsen made notes of all the little inaccuracies in his account. Pedantically, he noted he referred to 'Dennis' and not 'Des', and mentioned vodka, not rum.

The next day, Tuesday, 5 October, the jury heard from two young men Nilsen had attacked. The first was Paul Nobbs, who had met Nilsen almost exactly a year after Stewart, again in the Golden Lion in Soho. Nobbs described how grateful he was when Nilsen stepped in and saved him from the attention of a predatory older man. He explained how, during the evening, he had called his mother twice. Having decided to stay, there was

more drinking, kissing and fondling but Nilsen had declined the offer of sex.

Nobbs then described waking up after the attack. After looking at himself in the mirror, he had gone back to the bedroom. Nilsen had remarked he looked awful. 'Oh, thanks very much,' said Nobbs sarcastically.

When Ivan Lawrence, cross-examining, asked whether there'd been anything strange about Nilsen's manner during the evening, Nobbs replied that nothing in particular had worried him. The jury were left wondering if Nilsen was so out of control he could risk an attack on a man whose mother knew he was there, or whether, in fact, he was so in control that he could turn his violence on and off at will.

Similar testimony would come from Carl Stottor that afternoon. He told me when I met with him later that he had found the prospect of giving evidence an enormous ordeal. On the morning prior to his appearance in the witness box, he said that he sat in a friend's living room looking at himself in the mirror. What he saw displeased him. Having just dyed his blond hair black, he now felt he looked pale and washed out. Staring at his reflected image, he decided to apply a small amount of make-up. When he arrived in the court at 2.00pm, in an open-necked shirt with a medallion underneath, he said that he became extremely self-conscious. Suddenly, he felt very nervous. When Alan Green referred to him as 'slightly pathetic', he shrank further into himself. It was a hard job getting his evidence out.

Taking a deep breath, Stottor told the room the facts as he remembered them. When he faltered, Green helped him out: 'Is it true you told Nilsen that you weren't in touch with your family?' … 'Did it strike you as odd that Nilsen suggested you might get caught up in that loose zip?'

Stottor told the court how he had met Nilsen in Camden's Black Cap. Stottor had come down to London to escape from an unhappy relationship. Nilsen had seemed kind and sympathetic. Despite the cut on Stottor's face, Nilsen told him how lovely he looked. Then, some drinks later, at closing time, he suggested they go back to Cranley Gardens. He wasn't pushy, and promised not to try anything on. They took a cab back to Nilsen's flat, where Stottor became more and more depressed.

When he started to feel ill from the alcohol, they both went to bed. In the middle of the night, he remembered being in a semi-conscious state and

unable to breathe. As Nilsen had warned about getting caught up in the loose zip, Stottor thought the hand he felt on his neck was Nilsen trying to help. He heard Nilsen's voice saying, 'Stay still.' Then he passed out again.

Then he remembered hearing the sound of water, like a tap running. Next, he was underwater. He started to panic before passing out again. Sometime later, he woke up to find Bleep the dog licking his face. Nilsen was now beside the animal and fussing over him. He told Stottor he had got caught in the zip and probably had a nightmare as a result. Nilsen explained the water on his head was from a jug he'd poured over him to bring him to. He comforted him some more. Later, they cuddled in bed and, in the morning, Nilsen helped him to the Tube.

Stottor could only remember the evening in snapshots, but he had said enough for the prosecution to indicate that Nilsen deliberately and consciously 'chose' his victims. Counsel for the defence, however, wanted to know how Nilsen had seemed after the attack. Stottor said he seemed genuinely concerned. Lawrence suggested that this was evidence that Nilsen was moving in and out of abnormal states of mind. To emphasise the point, he told the jury how, when Chambers and Jay had asked about his manner after attacking Stottor, he'd replied, 'I hoped that these uncontrollable events would not affect our relationship.'

Now it was time for the court to hear more of what Nilsen himself had to say about his crimes and why he may have committed them. DCI Peter Jay rose to the stand with a statement Nilsen had written for them called 'Unscrambling Behaviour':

> *I guess that I may be a creature – a creative psychopath – who, when in a loss of rationality situation, lapses into temporarily a destructive psychopath, a condition induced by rapid and heavy ingestion of alcohol. At the subconscious root lies a sense of total isolation and a desperate search for a sexual identity. I have experienced transitionary* [sic] *sexual relationships with both males and females before my first killing. After this event, I was incapable of any intercourse. I felt repelled by myself and, as stated, I have had no experience of sexual penetration for some years.*
>
> *In a society of labels, it is convenient for me to let others believe that I am a homosexual. I enjoy the social company of both men and*

women, but prefer to drink socially with men. I am not in sympathy with the state of women who are the worse for drink.

Nilsen was keen to downplay his sexual orientation, and made it sound as ambiguous as possible. His statement continued with a self-consciously confused tone:

God only knows what thoughts go through my mind when it is captive within a destructive mood. Maybe the cunning, stalking killer instinct is the only single concentration released from a mind which, in that state, knows no morality. It may be the perverted overkill of my need to help people – victims who I decide to release quickly from the slings and arrows of their outrageous fortune, pain and suffering.

There is no disputing the fact that I am a violent killer under certain circumstance ... The victim is the dirty platter after the feast and the washing up is a clinical, ordinary task. It would be better if my reason for killing could be clinically defined – i.e. robbery, jealousy, hate, revenge, sex, blood, lust or sadism.

But it's none of these. Or it could be the subcon scious outpouring of all the primitive instincts of primeval man. Could it be the case of individual exaltation of beating the system and the need to beat and confound it time and time again?

Ruling out 'sex, blood, lust and sadism' as if he *wished* it could be that easy would have sounded to many in the jury as excuses clothed in fake sincerity. As for the idea he might have been acting out of a perverted sense of kindness, it was repulsive. But yet, as a whole, the statement did help to establish a gap between confessor and the crimes. As always, the author wrote like someone surprised by his actions:

It amazes me that I have no tears for these victims. I have no tears for myself or those bereaved by my actions. Am I a wicked person, constantly under pressure, who just cannot cope with it, who escapes to reap revenge against society through a haze of a bottle of spirits? But maybe it's because I was just born an evil man.

Living with so much violence and death, I've not been haunted by the souls and ghosts of the dead, leading me to believe that no such fictional phenomena, does or will ever exist. Memories of man's best friend, i.e. my dog, are already a little faded.

In the normal course of my life, I feel I had abnormal powers of mental rationality and morality. When under pressure of work and extreme pain of social loneliness and utter misery, I am drawn compulsively to a means of temporary escape from reality. This is achieved by taking increased draughts of alcohol and plugging into stereo music which mentally removes me to a high plane of ecstasy, joy and tears. This is a totally emotional experience.

This glorious experience and feeling is conjured up in this manner. I relive experiences from childhood to present – taking out the bad bits. When I take alcohol, I see myself drawn along and moved out of my isolated, prison flat. I bring [with me] *people who are not always allowed to leave because I want them to share my experiences and high feeling. I still do not know the engine of my performance. The one single piece of music that I get the greatest aural alcoholic high from is 'Oh Superman' by Laurie Anderson from the* Big Science *album. It has a hypnotic, trancelike effect on me. I listened to the eight-minute track ten times one night. I was compelled by it – I could not stop myself.*

In order to enlarge on [my experiences at] *Melrose Avenue and Cranley Gardens, I have made several attempts to strangle men. In some cases, the attempts were foiled by the struggle or escape of the subject. In others, I did not have the heart or desire to carry through the task. In all of the latter cases, the subject was already unconscious.*

The final paragraph sounded as if it could almost have been drafted by a solicitor: 'My remorse is of a deep and personal kind which will eat away inside me for the rest of my life. I am a tragically private person, not given to public tears. The enormity of these acts has left me in permanent shock … The evil was short-lived and it cannot live or breathe for long inside the conscience.'

The prosecution hoped the jury would find Nilsen's statements both cowardly and brazen. The defence argued it showed Nilsen really had been overwhelmed by his alter ego. Otherwise, why had he admitted *everything*? Jay, himself, agreed he had hardly known anyone co-operate so much.

But admitting everything didn't necessarily mean Nilsen was sorry or confused. It might also have meant he was simply revelling in what he had done. DCS Geoffrey Chambers read out all of Nilsen's murder confessions. They included lines already reproduced in this book, such as: 'On the floor was a piece of string with a tie attached to it … I know I must have killed him … I must have made up the piece of string that night …' and '… I looped the material round his neck again, pulled it as tight as I could and held on for what must have been two or three minutes. When I released my grip, he had stopped breathing.'

Green then brought out the cooking pot in which three heads had been boiled, the cutting board used to dissect pieces of John the Guardsman, and Martyn Duffey's knives. One person felt a profound sense of abhorrence more acutely than many others. Lesley Mead, Graham Allen's partner, had come to the trial to try to understand something of what had happened. She would tell me that watching Nilsen calmly 'play with an empty Marlboro packet, like a bored court official' simply confused her more. When she saw the cooking pot her partner's head had been boiled in, she walked out of the court.

On the afternoon of Wednesday, 6 October, Ivan Lawrence opened the case for the defence. His objective was not to dispute any of the facts that had been given but to show that Nilsen had been suffering from 'abnormality of mind' every time he had killed. This would mean he couldn't have formed the 'specific intention of murder', and therefore couldn't be held fully responsible. He told the jury that, for them to return such a verdict of manslaughter by diminished responsibility, the law merely required that he *may* have been suffering from such an abnormality. They simply had to consider him not *definitely* sane.

The three psychiatrists at the Old Bailey had a particularly unenviable task. Diagnosing Nilsen was hard enough, but guiding a jury about his state of mind when committing a crime went far beyond their usual remit. Nilsen says, 'Not to appear fully blank on the subject, they fell back on standard

labels of psychiatry: “psychopath”; “explosive”; “schizoid”; “paranoid”; “psychotic”; “sociopathic”; “dissociative”; “borderline personality disorder”; “necrophilia”; “alcoholic”; “grandiosity”; and a partridge in a pear tree …’

In truth, however, these doctors went to great lengths to express the uniqueness of this case. First in the witness box was Dr James Mackeith of the Bethlem Royal Hospital. Normally a cheerful-looking man with thick hair and a wide smile, he appeared initially subdued. He started by explaining who he was, what he did and his experience of the accused. Based on his interviews, he said he was in no doubt that Nilsen suffered from an ‘unspecified’ severe personality disorder. He clarified this by saying that rather than falling outside the spectrum of known disorders, he suffered from many of them.

The disorders Mackeith referred to came from the *International Classification of Diseases*. The *ICD* codifies all illnesses, and in the UK is the standard reference for mental conditions. In 1983, it was on its ninth revision, and in this version ‘psychotic behaviour-types’ caused by schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder and drug addiction had been separated from the range of so-called ‘personality disorders’. The types of mental condition had been listed on two ‘axes’. Nilsen certainly wasn’t on axis one, the ‘psychotic’ one. He wasn’t bipolar, nor was he schizophrenic. Schizophrenics are marked by a more severe breakdown of function, such as voices in the head and bizarre delusions. They can’t operate in society the way Nilsen had. And neither did his drinking affect him, for example, in the way that large amounts of LSD might have.

Many of the traits on axis two, however, sounded just like him. According to the most recent iteration of the *ICD*, the criteria for a personality disorder are as follows: ‘(1) Markedly disharmonious attitudes and behavior, generally involving several areas of functioning; (2) that the abnormal behavior pattern is enduring, of long standing, and not limited to episodes of mental illness; (3) that the abnormal behavior pattern is pervasive and clearly maladaptive to a broad range of personal and social situations; (4) that the above manifestations always appear during childhood or adolescence and continue into adulthood; that the disorder leads to considerable personal distress but this may only become apparent late in its

course; (5) that the disorder is usually, but not invariably, associated with significant problems in occupational and social performance.'

Since 1983, courts have arguably become attuned to the varieties of mental condition that might affect a defendant. They might, for instance, be evaluated on scales like the Hare Psychopath checklist (the first items are glibness, superficial charm and callousness), and prospects for treatability are then assessed. There is also more inclination to take the findings of personality disorders seriously and not regard them merely as descriptions of character traits. Psychiatrists are now generally more inclined to attribute more than one category of a personality disorder to a patient.

James Mackeith had a reputation for being a very competent and up-to-date psychiatrist. After interviewing Nilsen for several hours, he had diagnosed Nilsen's personality as showing schizoid, explosive, psychopathic and borderline disorders. The last needs more explanation than the others.

Borderline Personality Disorder is characterised by 'black-and-white thinking, emotional instability and interpersonal relationships that flit between idealisation and devaluation, poor self-esteem, bouts of impulsivity, anger and dissociation.' It was initially called 'borderline' as psychiatrists thought such people were somewhere between neurotic and psychotic. Now the defining characteristic is seen as instability. Mackeith's pre-trial report described Nilsen as having unstable moods, impaired impulse control, sudden anger, disturbed identity, sudden need for company when alone, and futility. Interestingly, long before he knew of such psychological concepts, in his essay entitled *The Monochrome Man*, Nilsen describes himself as a man whose moods were all black and white.

Mackeith analysed his problems as starting in childhood, where he thought he had developed 'maladaptive patterns of behaviour'. These included an inability to express feelings other than through anger, which came suddenly and forcefully. This lack of emotional development meant that when Nilsen felt anxious about a failing relationship, such as that with Gallichan, he would run away – both literally and metaphorically. Mackeith had noticed in his own interviews that Nilsen's anxiety might cause him to jump to conclusions about what others were thinking.

None of this, in itself, though, was more than neurotic. Something else in Nilsen's mental development was much more disturbing. Mackeith

related two stories that demonstrated how Nilsen had expressly associated unconsciousness with sex. Both stories are mentioned in Nilsen's autobiography, and have appeared in the narrative of this book. The first was walking into the sea at the age of 10 and being rescued by an older boy who masturbated over him. The other was the story of the Arab taxi driver he claimed to have killed in Aden in self-defence. Mackeith said that these stories demonstrated an 'extraordinary' interest in the concept of unconsciousness in a sexual context.

The psychiatrist proceeded to talk about how he'd heard Nilsen would masturbate with mirrors and beside corpses prior to dismemberment. He believed this was more than simple sexual deviance. It was part of the repeated instances of Nilsen's personality breaking down.

Mackeith thought Nilsen's personality breakdowns were far more significant to the crimes than the massive quantities of drink that had also been consumed. He explained how they had come about. First, there was the so-called 'compartmentalisation' – what Mackeith described as Nilsen's ability to separate out his psychological functions 'in an exceptional way'. He thought this split in his personality, in combination with a reduced sense of identity, made him prone to bouts of 'depersonalisation', or 'dissociation'. In these states, Nilsen would have felt 'removed' from himself, as if watching someone else. These instances are strikingly similar to the 'trance-like ritual', and 'dreamlike states' which Nilsen describes.

Another constant character trait in Nilsen that Mackeith perceived was his aggression. He considered it to be especially pronounced when his point of view wasn't being met. It seemed to Mackeith that, in interpersonal situations, Nilsen was suspicious, paranoid, grandiose and craved attention. Mackeith even suggested that some killings might have been triggered when people didn't listen closely enough to him. In a written report, he said that were Nilsen to go to prison, if he didn't get enough attention he might develop a florid, psychotic mental illness or become extremely depressed.

Alan Green's strategy was to try to make Mackeith's opinions seem like imprecise waffle. He asked the jury to consider whether by attributing to Nilsen almost every disorder in the book, it actually showed that Mackeith was undecided. More to the point, Mackeith's account didn't explain

precisely was going on when Nilsen killed. He seemed undecided, for instance, as to whether it was in blackouts or fits of rage.

Green then asked Mackeith how he knew everything he claimed to about Nilsen's past. Mackeith admitted that all he had had to work on were Nilsen's own self-reports. Green wanted to know what literal truth he ascribed to these, in particular Nilsen's drowning and Aden stories. Mackeith replied that their literal truth was beside the point; Nilsen was capable of believing quite contradictory things at different levels of functioning. What always mattered was *his* truth.

The question still remained of how one could actually believe *anything* generated by Nilsen. Green claimed he was an inveterate liar whose talking was designed just to deceive. He reminded the court how, for instance, Nilsen had told guests he was married or had seen active service in Northern Ireland. Green added that it stood to reason that, if Nilsen hadn't been so deceptive, he would not have managed to kill 15 men before being caught.

Green thought that, between night and day, he didn't so much 'separate out mental functioning' as put on an act. When strangers came back to Nilsen's flat, it didn't 'just happen' – he deliberately asked them back. Green read out some of Nilsen's statements about how he had invited victims back, and then turned to Mackeith and asked him whether or not he thought, by the evidence of Nilsen's own stories, he showed resourcefulness and cunning. Mackeith didn't think so.

Green then reminded the jury how Nilsen had allowed Duffey's knives to rust, and picked up his belongings from the left-luggage at Euston Station. As for the so-called 'depersonalisation', how, he asked, was he able to stop midway through killing Stottor? When he killed Barlow and John the Guardsman, he clearly wasn't in a trance; he did it consciously just because they had annoyed him.

Mackeith interjected, stating that just because Nilsen seemed to be saying he killed without motive, it certainly didn't mean that was really the case. Nilsen, he pointed out, had personality problems and it needed expert judgement to interpret the truth behind his statements. He remained resolute on his opinion, but he wouldn't say whether Nilsen's mental problems were sufficient for a verdict of diminished responsibility. That had to be up to the jury.

‘Quite,’ said Green. He read out the statute, and then asked if there was anything in Nilsen’s statements that could constitute an ‘arrested development of mind’. He was, after all, an intelligent and lucid man. Mackeith suggested that the definition be widened to ‘arrested development of personality’. The judge agreed.

Dr Patrick Gallwey, the defence’s second psychiatric expert witness, had receding hair and a professorial demeanour. Like Mackeith, he felt Nilsen suffered from a retardation of personality, but not intelligence. Unlike his colleague, however, he didn’t think Nilsen’s condition could be found in the *ICD* classification. He attempted his own definition, which was so complicated it ended up confusing both judge and jury. It was called ‘Borderline, False-Self as if Pseudo-Normal, Narcissistic Personality Disorder’.

It was a ‘borderline’ disorder in that Nilsen was unstable and suffered from emotional extremes and black-and-white thinking. Gallwey called the condition ‘pseudo-normal’, as throughout Nilsen’s adult life, he appeared to be normal, whereas he was really always on the verge of tipping into a ‘false-self’. The latter was a paranoid and schizoid personality that took over during times of high stress. Being ‘schizoid’ meant Nilsen’s emotionally blunt tendencies were intensified to the point that he couldn’t feel ‘normally’ at all.

Even during his ‘pseudo-normal’ periods, however, Nilsen’s emotional responses were poor. Gallwey said he constantly sought power because he felt so cut off, inferior and worthless. He also explained how Nilsen’s schizoid behaviour was of the type that involved a rich, elaborate fantasy life – a trait now more commonly associated with schizo-typal cases. This, however, was generally well hidden. His narcissism was more obvious. It showed in Nilsen’s constant grandiosity. He told the court: ‘He really does think he is the murderer of the century.’

In response to some blank looks from the jury, Gallwey then tried to clarify the relationship between Nilsen’s various mental states. Normally, he said, Nilsen was able to keep his paranoid and schizoid disturbances in check. But there was always conflict going on; psychological pressure would build up, and need release. This happened in episodic breakdowns where he was now *predominately* schizoid. Gallwey clarified the meaning

of the word – it didn't mean Nilsen was delusional, but that his emotions had stopped functioning. The breakdowns were 'psycho-sexual', violent, sudden and seemingly without motive. When they happened, Nilsen wasn't in control.

Gallwey tried to explain why these breakdowns happened. He said Nilsen particularly needed close relationships to stave off his 'false self'. Life in London had been a recipe for disaster. The break-up with Gallichan may well have been the last straw. He said it left Nilsen 'drowning in his own nightmares'. With no anchor, his schizoid tendencies started taking over. These were very distinctive – of the type, Gallwey said, that 'indulges imagination for its own sake'. He explained that while such tendencies might also be found in some artists, in Nilsen they were just destructive, removing the last of his emotions. At the time of the murders, then, the victims had no meaning to him as real individuals. He was so lost in a depersonalised state that he became muddled as to their identity, and sometimes thought of them as part of himself. Nilsen echoes this when he talks about 'fantasy props' and 'dualism'.

Gallwey said he saw the murders as being entirely consistent with a 'false-self' personality finding itself in the wrong set of circumstances. Even though the killing of Malcolm Barlow and John Howlett seemed to contradict the theory of episodic breakdowns, the psychiatrist believed, in truth, Nilsen had simply misremembered his thoughts and feelings.

Gallwey thought that during the period of the murders, Nilsen would have been unable to understand what was going on. He explained how he had tried cutting back on drink but said that that could not have helped at all. But he thought Nilsen had indeed suffered from diminished responsibility, not because he didn't understand his mental problems, but because when he murdered he couldn't emotionally distinguish between reality and fantasy. That meant there could be no 'malice aforethought'. Gallwey explained that feeling was a crucial part of intent. He said that the episode with Carl Stottor, rather than showing a cold-hearted cover-up, demonstrated Nilsen had clearly gone in and out of a stage of dissociation and afterwards was 'reassembling' his personality. *This* showed the difference between the Nilsen who had emotions and the one who killed.

Allan Green put it to Gallwey that Nilsen knew exactly what might happen when he deliberately invited people back. Gallwey replied he might

have factually known but he may not have *emotionally* understood what he was doing. And if he didn't *feel* his actions were wrong he would not have been able fundamentally to 'know what he was doing'. He would have known the 'nature of his acts' but not the 'quality' of them.

On Monday, 31 October, Lawrence asked Gallwey to recap. He focused on three main points. First, that the murders were part of a defence mechanism that prevented Nilsen from becoming completely psychotic by directing destruction outwards. Second, he said that if a person's emotional make-up stops working, he can be unable to attribute meaning to the things he does. And finally, he emphasised his belief that Nilsen's schizoid tendencies had pushed his fantasy life into an abnormal and destructive place.

Lawrence then reminded the court what sort of abnormality they were looking for. He said it was one that would 'substantially impair his judgement' and was 'a state of mind so different from that of ordinary human beings that the reasonable man would term it abnormal'.

There was only one witness left – Dr Paul Bowden – again from the Bethlem and Maudsley hospital. His role was to 'rebut' the testimony of Mackeith and Gallwey. He had one big advantage over them – only he had really got to know the defendant. In fact, he had seen him 16 times dating back to Nilsen's first week on remand. He'd also spoken to others who knew Nilsen, including Cathy Hughes and Roger Farnham from the Job Centre, former boyfriend David Gallichan, and the last person to stay with Nilsen, Trevor Simpson.

Tall and moustachioed with combed-back hair, he approached the box in a cool, precise manner. On the Monday and Tuesday, he explained why he could find no abnormality in Nilsen which fitted the definition of the Homicide Act 1957. He admitted he did find Nilsen 'abnormal' in a loose, colloquial sense. But Bowden didn't feel Nilsen suffered from a mental disorder; he said he was simply a man with deviant desires who used deception to make it look like he couldn't help it. He immediately pointed to the way he would constantly revise his childhood accounts, to make himself seem more emotionally deprived than he had originally claimed.

Bowden considered Nilsen to be a man with normal mental functioning who also had extreme guilt about his own sexuality. As he felt guilty, he figured he might as well do bad things. He said the murders were conscious,

deliberate acts to satisfy his desires. Nilsen's recollections, he said, were far too strong for there to be any question of the dissociation the other psychiatrists had talked about. He said he had other experience of such things and they invariably involved a long black-out.

But, as much as Bowden's testimony chimed with a 'good sense' view, his opinions soon became more counter-intuitive. It seemed odd to say, as he did, that masturbating by corpses wasn't sexual or powdering of the bodies was just a practical measure to stop them from smelling. Furthermore, it seemed very peculiar to say that Nilsen's grandiosity was merely a reaction to being caught.

The defence asked why he had first said he found no 'abnormality of mind' in Nilsen, and then later changed that to an 'insignificant abnormality'. Bowden replied he'd changed his mind. He had simply discovered more about him. It was like when he'd signed the papers to put Nilsen on suicide watch in Brixton. Nilsen had seemed agitated but, over the next few months, he felt he had got a deeper measure of him and his complaining nature.

Bowden simply considered Nilsen to be a liar and manipulator. As such, he chose to ignore many of the things he had been told by him. For example, he didn't believe the death of Nilsen's grandfather had had the damaging effect Nilsen claimed. As for Nilsen's isolation, he said he believed this was a result of, rather than the cause of, being a murderer. Finally, he felt that Nilsen had been perfectly capable of forming personal relationships, but had forced himself to objectify people. Bowden spelt out what he meant by that: 'It made it easier to kill people.' To illustrate how Nilsen deliberately suppressed his conscious, he described how when talking about the killing of John Howlett, he had to leave the room until he regained his composure.

Allen Green summed up his case over Tuesday afternoon and Wednesday morning. His message was simple: Nilsen was cunning and had used his intelligence to avoid being detected while continuing to murder for pleasure. The jury were reminded of the level of planning involved in warning Stottor about the sleeping bag zip, the preparation of the tie to kill Sinclair, and allowing Martyn Duffey's knives to rust. The fact he had been drunk was no excuse for any of his actions.

Ivan Lawrence's final address appealed to plain reason. He went through Nilsen's offences, crime by crime, and asked the court, again and again, 'Is there not anything wrong with this man?' Just because Bowden – or 'Dr No' as he called him – had failed to see anything wrong, it didn't mean that the jury had to 'ignore the blindingly obvious'. He might not have been insane 'but he wasn't normal either'.

On Thursday morning, Judge Croom-Johnson instructed the jury. He told them if they considered it *possible* that Nilsen did not understand what he was doing when he was killing, they should return a verdict of manslaughter. He closed by saying, 'There are evil people who do evil things. Committing murder is one of them. There must be no excuses for Nilsen if he has moral defects. A nasty nature is not an arrested or retarded development of mind.'

The jury retired shortly before lunchtime on Thursday, 3 November. It had been expected that they would come back that afternoon. They were, however, deadlocked at 6-6.

The next day, at 7.00am, Nilsen wrote a diary entry in his cell, which Brian Masters has kindly permitted me to reproduce here: 'I rise early, still an unconvicted man, to pen this letter. The jury is still out (and so are the Leyland workers). It will be 5 November tomorrow and society's turn to throw me on the bonfire.' At 11.25am, the judge said that he was prepared to accept a majority verdict. That verdict came through at 4.25pm – on the attempted murder of Paul Nobbs, everyone agreed that Nilsen was guilty. On every other count, the jury was split 10-2 in favour of a guilty verdict.

Dennis Nilsen was sentenced to life imprisonment with a recommendation that he serve a minimum of 25 years. He was taken down to the cells, and then off to Wormwood Scrubs. While he sat in front of the television in the hospital area of the Scrubs, his first thoughts were self-pitying ones about being 'expelled from society'. The next morning, when he woke up, he penned a letter to Brian Masters, angry about what he had read in the *News of the World* by John Lisners, whom he knew was writing a book about him. Nilsen's previously unpublished words are provided courtesy of Brian Masters: 'I arrived at Wormwood Scrubs last night. I read John Lisners' "sour grapes" as he, in his 'professional knowledge' of me summed up my life and trial. It can't be much of a book, which is largely based on fourth-hand knowledge … I exercise a great sense of relief that the

trial is now finally over. I will see Ralph Haeems soon in order to discuss the merits and practicalities of appealing or not.'

11

THE END OF THE ROAD

'In a most staggering paradox, I only became mentally liberated as a result of my arrest.'
DENNIS NILSON, TO MATTHEW MALEKOS

On 9 March 2010, the European Court of Human Rights announced their refusal to hear a final appeal by Dennis Nilsen to have his manuscript returned so that he could work on it. Nilsen had now taken his case as far as it seemed he logically could, and had failed. The European judges had made final something that their British counterparts had ruled on seven years before. This was to uphold that the Prison Service's verdict that, in his autobiography, Nilsen: (1) had nothing say in the public interest; (2) wanted to spread 'highly personal' details of some offences along with 'lurid and pornographic passages'; and (3) sought both to justify his conduct and denigrate people he disliked.

The ECHR decision was the end of the line for Nick Wells, Nilsen's lawyer for over 12 years. During that time, he had proved himself an innovative legal thinker. Changing the law in favour of a serial killer's rights, however, eventually proved too much for his abilities. Shortly after hearing the ECHR's judgment, the lawyer and his client parted company.

Nilsen and Wells' journey through the courts had started back in October 2001 with another 'rights' case. On this occasion it was Nilsen's unsuccessful attempt to get access to the gay 'pin-up' magazine, *Vulcan*. Although the bid failed Nilsen thought he had found something useful whilst preparing it – the ability to use 'legally privileged' envelopes to communicate with his lawyer. This practice made him wonder if he might also be allowed to use similar envelopes to bring in a copy of his draft manuscript.

Nilsen asked Wells about this who, in turn, asked the governor. The governor replied that as *History of a Drowning Boy* was not a legal

document, it would still need to be read and approved. Some months later, however, in 2002 Nilsen asked Wells to send the manuscript in anyway.

When he did so, the book was confiscated and a letter delivered to Nilsen's cell:

> *The Prison Service has now read the manuscript and considered this request. It has decided not to allow the manuscript to be passed to Mr Nilsen ... The offences are an integral part of the manuscript. The manuscript does not consist of serious representations about conviction or form part of serious comment about crime, the processes of justice or the penal system. Rather it is a platform for Mr Nilsen to denigrate people he dislikes ... The withholding of the manuscript pursues a legitimate aim, namely the protection of morals, the protection of the reputation and rights of others, and the protection of information received in confidence ...*

Nilsen was furious. He would later write to me: 'I understand that many of the prison revelations in the book (including the Central TV thing) will be embarrassing to the HO. I care not about this. I do not play politics, I merely write testimony of a personal life … Although my body is imprisoned, they will not succeed in controlling the positive expressions from my mind.'

The following year – 2003 – Nilsen's lawyers decided on another tack. It was now reported in the media that Nilsen was going to take the Prison Service to Judicial Review on the grounds that certain prison rules violated his basic freedom of expression. The idea that a mass killer could take on an agent of the government on the grounds that *his* rights were being infringed sounded like the sort of thing you couldn't make up. I had almost forgotten about Nilsen's book. Now, again, I was intrigued.

I wondered if it was *just* attention he was looking for, or whether there was more to this mission to have his book published. But I couldn't judge what he was up to until I had finally read *History of a Drowning Boy*. After some deliberation I decided my best chance might simply be to write a letter and ask Nilsen, straight out, how we could make this happen. That is what I did.

Two days later, I received a reply written on his new electric typewriter and sent from Full Sutton Prison. He appeared happy to hear from me, and said he would soon put me in touch with Jonny Marling, who had a copy. On the strength of what I was going to be given access to – both *History of a Drowning Boy* and a series of essays, letters, pictures and tapes, the *Sunday Times* magazine commissioned a 5,000 word feature.

On a fresh and sunny day in May, I drove out west to see Jonny Marling in the offices of his travel business in Bath, situated at the edge of town. Marling, now in his thirties, seemed friendly and slightly intense. As he brought me a cup of tea, it was hard not to miss the large Nilsen painting by the desk.

'You must think I am very, very odd,' he said.

I changed the subject. 'How did your friendship with Des begin?' I asked.

He said he had chanced upon *Killing for Company* while browsing in a bookshop. The dust jacket revealed that Nilsen used to live in Cricklewood, where Marling, too, had lived. The coincidence intrigued him and he decided to buy it. After reading the book, Marling said he then started to become fixated with wanting to know what had made this 'apparently ordinary bloke' do what he did. He first wrote to Masters and then to Nilsen himself. The letters went well and soon they were writing weekly. Marling would visit whenever he could.

It was all very confusing. The man in front of me seemed intelligent and well balanced with a nice life. It was hard to see what place such a dark hobby might have in it. And it wasn't just criminological curiosity that had taken root in him: Marling appeared to really want Des's friendship. More than anything I was mystified why he was so ready to believe Nilsen's versions of events. Sometimes, he seemed to want to excuse Nilsen even more than Nilsen himself had done. When I asked him why he thought his friend had killed so many people, there was no hesitation – he was convinced it was the booze.

A couple of hours later, we travelled across town to collect a missing document from his home. Marling's petite wife opened the door. She welcomed me into their clean, white kitchen. After chatting about their pets and children, the conversation moved on to how she had spent weeks over the past year typing up the manuscript I was being loaned. The killer's place

in this gentle domestic set-up now seemed even more perplexing than before.

In the following months, Nilsen replied to my letters in a prompt and business-like way. On request he supplied me with a list of reasons why he believed his book should be published and gave the various legal arguments that were going to be used. He told me his lawyers were looking to challenge clause '5b' of the Prison Rules, which prohibited prisoners 'sending out any material for publication if it is about their own crime or past offences.' The only exception was when such correspondence consisted of 'serious representations about conviction or sentence'.

Nilsen not only believed his was a serious work, but also that his ability to express himself was a human right. He wrote to me saying, 'A prisoner recognises that he loses his liberty as a result of a just prison sentence, but the law never recognises that he loses his basic "freedom of expression".'

But when it came to the Judicial Review it only took two days in October for Judge Maurice Kay to hear the case, and rule that the Human Rights Act had not been infringed and that he could see no other reason for the manuscript to be returned.

Despite the adverse outcome, Nilsen was pleased what I had written about the episode and the fairness of my approach. Afterwards, we kept up an ad hoc correspondence. Over a period of time, the hard-edged tone of Nilsen's letters started to soften and I begun to wonder if more than 20 years in prison was actually 'normalising' him. The continued complaints about the general state of the world were still there, but the letters were becoming more self-aware. I speculated if this might indicate psychological improvement.

While writing my magazine piece, I had asked many experts what emotional development they thought would ever be possible. Most felt his emotions and personality would probably remain fairly static. Brian Masters even told me that Nilsen only understood remorse like a 'mathematical equation'. He said 'attention-seeking' was Nilsen's 'equivalent of love' and worried that he sought to 'intellectually seduce' others' minds. But Masters hadn't seen Nilsen in more than 10 years; how could he really know?

One person who believes Nilsen has grown emotionally is Matthew Malekos. In his thesis 'The Birth of Psychopathy: the Psychology of a Serial Killer', he argues that Nilsen's creativity in prison indicates the restoration of fully-functioning emotions. He believes the murders provided an impetus for Nilsen to look into himself, and that subsequent emotional development has taken place in prison. His thesis states: 'The use of criminal actions, perversely, has made Dennis Nilsen far stronger and more optimistic than he was at the point before carrying out his homicidal actions … he has undergone a positive personal transformation while he has been incarcerated … not because of prison, but in spite of it.'

Malekos's reasons for believing this theory start conventionally enough, but they invariably end up in very esoteric arguments. His theories encompass spiritual and mystical thinking. In particular, Malekos uses the term 'self-actualisation' – a term originally invented by the twentieth-century American humanistic psychologist, Abraham Maslow – to explain Nilsen's change. He describes it as a state 'in which an individual strives to be the best that they can be having resolved their past traumas and "inner demons"'…and says that such people '[experience] an overwhelming sense of joy from books, music and the arts'.

Whatever one makes of Malekos's theories, the question of whether Nilsen – and those like him – can change remains an important one. Prisons are meant to try to rehabilitate all prisoners. Social and religious reformers alike will tell you that whatever punishment may be required to serve justice, society must never stop caring about the state of prisoners' souls and minds. Even when rehabilitation serves no practical end – for the whole-life prisoner – a moral society should aspire towards it. This had been uppermost in the mind of Lord Longford throughout his visiting periods with Nilsen.

What, though, if change might come, not through therapy or religion, but simply through growing older? Medical literature does indicate some people with personality disorders do, indeed, find their condition subsides with time. Could this be what was happening with Nilsen? His increased self-awareness seemed to indicate so and yet a question remained of how we could trust such evidence.

Short of using lie detectors or PPGs, all we can ever go on is what people say. People like Nilsen are, however, extremely deceptive. And even

though I thought I could detect signs of a changing character, every so often I would read something of Nilsen's that would frighten me. On page 312 of Malekos's thesis, for instance, Nilsen was quoted as having written in a letter: 'Yes, I am obsessed with remembering and enjoying the frisson of my sexual rituals … what else is there [to do] but to caress [my] memories in my present social wasteland … I do not fantasise about other prisoners, but about the past.'

Since 2003, Nilsen has remained in Full Sutton Prison. He gets up at around 7.00am and starts working at 8.30am in the workshop where he translates books into Braille. At lunchtime he eats a sandwich and work finishes at 3.00pm. His wages are about £17 a week, and with this money, he rents a portable television. He no longer has a keyboard or a budgie in his room. Nearly all his spare time is still spent on his typewriter. His autobiographical reflections on prison life now amount to 4,500 pages.

Nilsen remains on cordial terms with the other inmates on the Vulnerable Prisoner Unit, but feels little in common with them socially or intellectually. He does, however, seem to have reached an equilibrium with his surroundings. This is despite a judge having ruled in 2006, when the Home Office system of whole-life tariffs had been abandoned, that he would never be eligible for parole.

Letters I have received during the period 2003 to 2012 have continued to be written in an increasingly 'normal' manner. His favourite topic eventually moved away from prison conditions to current affairs. The last letter he sent me was about the Jimmy Savile case, which was all over the newspapers after the former TV presenter was accused posthumously of perpetrating a huge number of sex attacks over several decades. Nilsen vividly described him as 'garishly attired with long blond hair, appendages festooned with chunky gold bangles, chains, shades, and topped off by the omnipresent huge cigar, which, as well as being subliminally phallic, showed Jimmy shaking his huge cock at the world …'

Nilsen called this Savile's 'false persona' which covered up for his stunted emotional development. In adulthood, he opined that all of Savile's 'emotional interactions' were 'transacted entirely on his terms and under his control'. Then, one sentence jumped out. Nilsen wrote: 'As Savile's MO was established, he grew in confidence. Of course, he never viewed himself

as "studiously evil".' Not being 'studiously evil' was the exact expression Nilsen had used when referring to himself in one of his earliest letters to me.

I wondered if this meant he, Nilsen, was about to admit the extent to which he might have enjoyed his crimes? But the letter just fizzled out. Then I remembered the emotionally inert response he had given when confronted with the full extent of the evil of his first murder. In 2005, two policemen arrived at HMP Full Sutton to show him new photographs of someone he might have killed. By the time they left, Nilsen's first victim was finally identified as 14-year-old Stephen Holmes. Nilsen casually spoke about the matter a year later in a letter to the *Evening Standard*:

> *In 1983, I made a full confession at Hornsey Police Station on the matter of the youth I had encountered and killed ... while I was in a drunken state near the end of December 1978 ... while I was 'bingeing' in the Cricklewood Arms pub ...*
>
> *Afterwards, at Melrose Avenue, I had no idea who this youth was ... as he had nothing on him at all ... no money or other means of identification ... except, maybe, a latch key ... which was disposed of.*
>
> *After my trial ... police inquiries went more or less cold. Then, in 1990, out of the blue ... while I was, coincidentally, in this prison on my first visit, (until 1991), detectives from the Metropolitan Police visited me ... for the purposes of identifying this victim.*
>
> *All they had was ... a small blurred 'passport-type' 1980s photocopy of a photocopy of a small photograph ... which, for the purposes of identification ... could have been anyone ... from this scant material I was unable to make any kind of positive ID ... they departed as swiftly as they had arrived ... then, last year, a new (police) team arrived.*

Carl Stottor's reaction when I reminded him about Nilsen's letter to the *Evening Standard* about the identification of Stephen Holmes was that it was a sign of his 'incredible arrogance'. He told me, 'Nilsen, is just a nasty, nasty man … he's a nobody who enjoys the notoriety that being a serial killer has brought him.' When I told him about the full extent of Nilsen's legal battles, he rolled his eyes and said he found it outrageous he could get

legal aid for his human rights case when he himself was denied victim compensation for the attack.

Stottor's appearances in numerous 'real-crime' documentaries have always shown him to be, to varying degrees, troubled. His weight has fluctuated, and frequently his voice has trembled. When I met him at his home in 2012, however, he appeared much more at peace. To draw a line under 'Stottor the victim', he now calls himself 'Kha-Ra Willis'. The name reflects his love of ancient Egypt, as does his seaside flat, which looked like cross between a museum and a bohemian hang-out. In the corner is an up-ended sarcophagus that opens up to reveal itself as a DVD rack. During our interview, a black cat called Cleopatra wandered among all the Egyptobilia and Kha-Ra's artwork.

At 51, Kha-Ra has diabetes and is HIV-positive. But still he remains optimistic about life. One of his favourite words is 'survivor'. During my afternoon with him, he used it almost continuously. He talked about how he'd survived Nilsen, drink and depression, and he intended to do the same with HIV. To put his life into perspective and to keep positive, he told me he was writing a memoir. He was keen to emphasise how Nilsen was only going to be allocated as much space as he deserved. It was clear, however, that he found just talking about him upsetting.

Nilsen's book was a particularly sore subject. Kha-Ra said he had learnt about it in 1998 from the same article that I had read. His reaction was an immediate rush of blood and panic – a sense that he just wasn't being allowed to forget about the man who had tried to kill him. Then Kha-Ra decided to do something practical. He printed up a petition and went out into the street asking for signatures. When all the sheets were full, he sent them to the Home Office.

He told me, 'This book [*History of a Drowning Boy*] is just about his desire for attention and publicity, that's all it is. Nilsen wants to cater for his monster, ego, image. He's just a monster and we shouldn't pay attention to him. We should be thinking about the victims and the ripple effect on other victims.'

Kha-Ra asked me what Nilsen had said about him. I explained how he had said that he thought he might be attributing all his problems to one night in 1982. Kha-Ra couldn't believe that, after all Nilsen had done, he could be that presumptuous. The next day, he sent me an email: 'Talk about

pot … kettle! Nilsen likes to pass his victims over like they are worth nothing, just vulnerable people, waifs and strays. Nilsen's victims were blameless and innocent, something the press at the time were never kind to. The same goes for the judicial system. I think it is a great miscarriage of justice that Nilsen was never charged with my attempted murder and that I was never compensated as a victim, but that is justice for you, affordable only to those with money. All any victim seeks is justice.'

The following week, I went to see Graham Allen's former partner, Lesley Mead. Although now in her sixties, it wasn't hard to imagine her as the short, attractive barmaid her son Shane had described her as once being. But she had clearly had a hard life. Her build was now heavy and her eyes twitched nervously when she spoke. Like Kha-Ra, Mead shares her living space with a cat, a stray she found outside the community centre where she helps out.

I was here at the suggestion of Shane. I had told him I was impressed by the way he had written about his father. He suggested it might help my research to see those events through her eyes. For over two hours, I listened to Mead speaking plainly, without any artifice. She said she knew Puggy hadn't been perfect; neither had she, for that matter. But she had been enormously hurt by the way the papers had generalised about Nilsen's victims and their families. I drove home with a sick feeling in my stomach. Back in my study, I decided to re-read Shane's account of how his mother had taken the news of his father's murder: 'It all started with a scream. I heard it from the top of the road as I made my way home from school. Somehow, I knew it was my mother's pain. It was a scream from nowhere and of unbearable suffering. And it didn't stop. It was 1983 and my mother had just been informed that her lover, my father, missing for over a year, had been discovered – murdered and dismembered and stuffed in two black bin bags in the flat of serial killer Dennis Nilsen. I was seven, and Hell was on its way.'

That afternoon, two uniformed and two plain-clothes officers had arrived at Lesley's house. Shane explains how his mother dealt with learning the circumstances surrounding Puggy's death:

The months immediately after the death are vague. I hardly recall a thing. I think my mother was shell-shocked … She stayed locked in

her room, the house growing darker, and alcohol keeping her afloat.

The last sane thing, or the first insane thing my mother did, was to attend Nilsen's trial at The Old Bailey….

Post-trial, I remember my mother drinking suicidal amounts. Drunk, she would do nothing but cry and sit on the floor alongside a small stereo listening to old love songs … With the story now out of the media, the victims' families were left at home alone without even the small comfort of the nation's empathy to help absorb the event. There were no more journalists offering comfort as they scavenged the victims for scraps of untold story, and no more newspaper reports mentioning their names and telling of their plight. It was over. The murderer was in jail and other news was more important. The victims now only had the torture of solitude and silence to take comfort from … that was no comfort at all. My mother's drinking and suicidal tendencies spiralled to a climax. She could no longer take it any more. She decided that The Blackout was for her.

That 'blackout' was a suicide attempt.

I thought again about how her hand had shaken as she talked to me. I started to feel guilt about having made her relive those memories; they surely must have distressed her more than she let on.

A couple of days later, I emailed Shane and asked him how Lesley was doing. He thanked me but confirmed it had, indeed, shaken her more than she had initially realised. The scars had faded but the wound, it seemed, was easily aggravated.

Later that afternoon, I followed up a claim from Martyn Hunter-Craig that Nilsen now had a Facebook account. It sounded far-fetched, but he seemed adamant. I wondered if one of his correspondents might be posting on his behalf. Certainly, when I looked at the page it really seemed to be his style. But as I scrolled down it became apparent that it was actually a fan using the archive of Nilsen quotes available from books, newspapers and documentaries to write in his voice.

I found it unsurprising that people on the internet should be using social media to further a fixation with serial killers. Still, it made me wonder if my own interest in Nilsen might also be helping to fuel the behaviour of such cranks. Where, I asked myself, did the line between sociological enquiry

and morbid fascination exist? And, did all interest in Nilsen, ultimately, serve to flatter his ego?

I started to reflect on the last letters we had exchanged in 2012. At the time of his 'Jimmy Savile' letter he had seemed resolute he would find new lawyers and continue with his crusade to publish. He believed he could find new ways to appeal. I imagined this desire had been given added urgency since he had finally been told he would never be allowed parole.

But in April 2013, something happened that might have finally put paid to the last of Nilsen's ambitions. The Ministry of Justice announced a consultation on plans to reform provision of Legal Aid. These included proposals to reduce prisoners' access to aid other than where such access concerned a legitimate appeal over sentencing. Nilsen's complaints about the prison authorities disrespecting his human rights would certainly be excluded.

So now it appears that unless Nilsen finds a publisher willing to take on copies of his sprawling, unedited drafts in whatever form they might exist outside of prison, there really is no further for him to go. Whatever journalists and criminologists may still have to say about these crimes, to the certain relief of his victims, it seems the killer's ongoing contributions to that discussion have finally come to an end.

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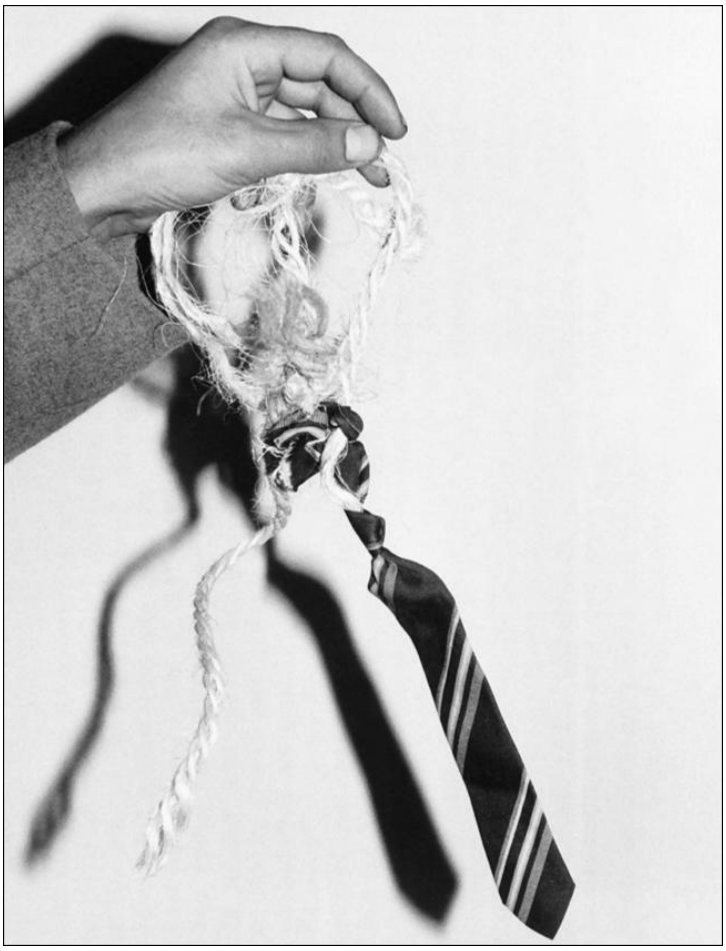
Dennis Nilsen being driven from the Old Bailey in a police van, without the customary blanket over his head, after being sentenced to life imprisonment on 4 November 1983. He had insisted on being uncovered at all his hearings.
Photo ©Mirrorpix

Nilsen in police uniform: he trained as a policeman at Hendon Police College.

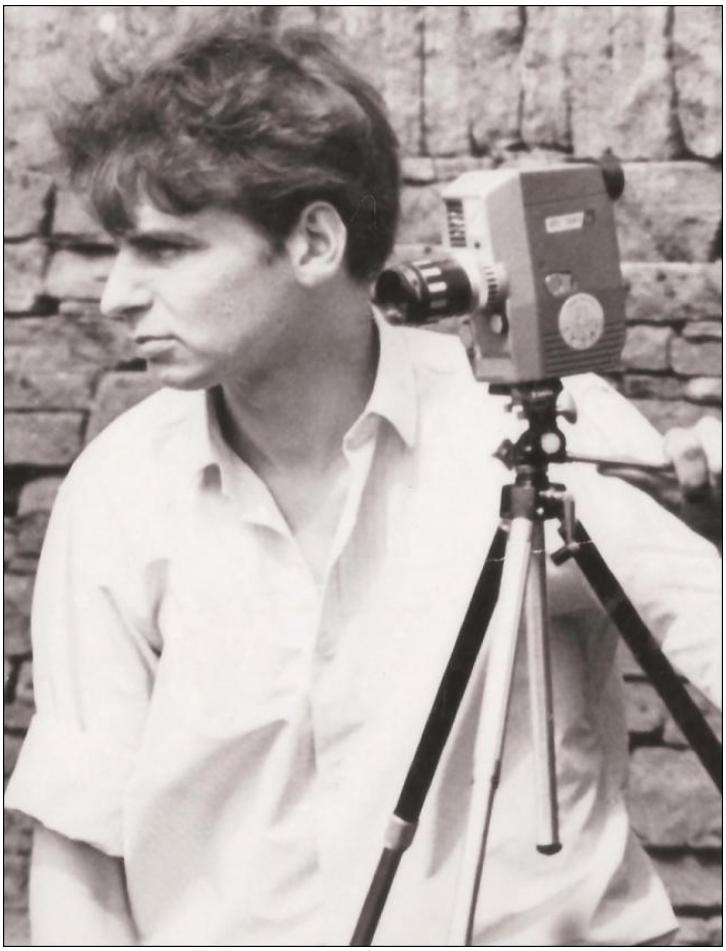
Photo ©Mirrorpix

The house at 23 Cranley Gardens, Muswell Hill, North London, where the remains of three of Nilsen's victims were discovered in the drainage.
Photo ©Mirrorpix



The necktie used by Nilsen to strangle Stephen Sinclair.

Photo ©Mirrorpix



Nilsen in the army at Maybury: his movie camera was instrumental in confusing reality with fantasy.
Photo courtesy Brian Masters

Mrs Betty Scott, mother of Dennis Nilsen, in June 1988.

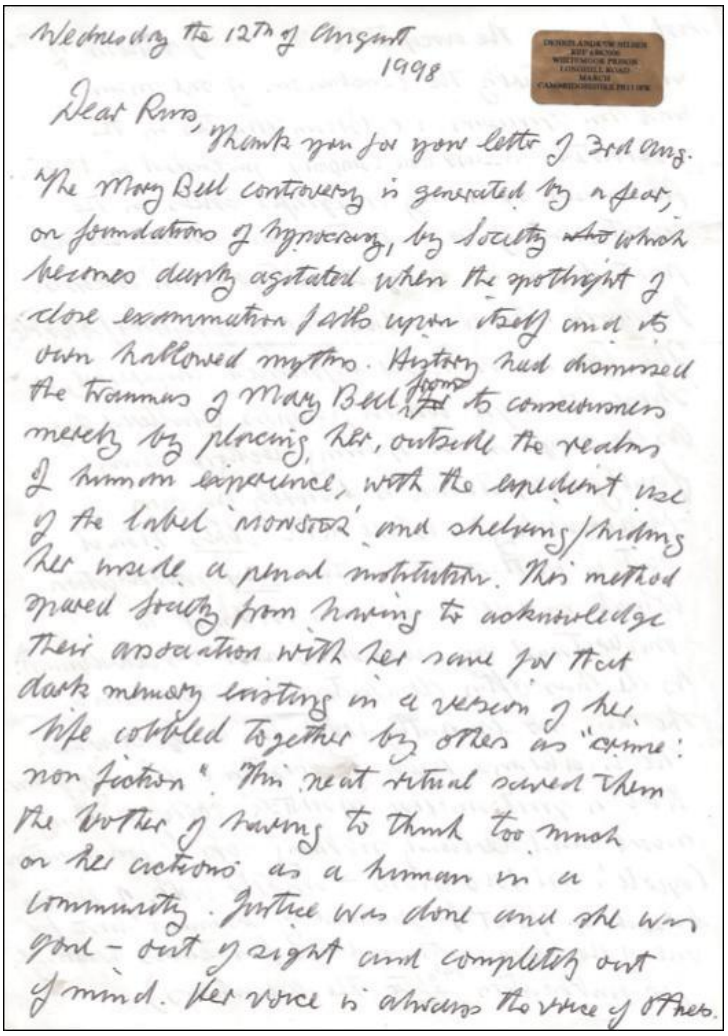
Photo ©Mirrorpix

The dunes by Fraserburgh Bay where Nilsen believes his grandfather may have abused him.

Photo ©Russ Coffey

An oil painting-cum-collage, called ‘Bacardi Sunrise’, which Nilsen created whilst in Whitmoor Prison.

Photo ©Mirrorpix



Wednesday the 12th of August
1998

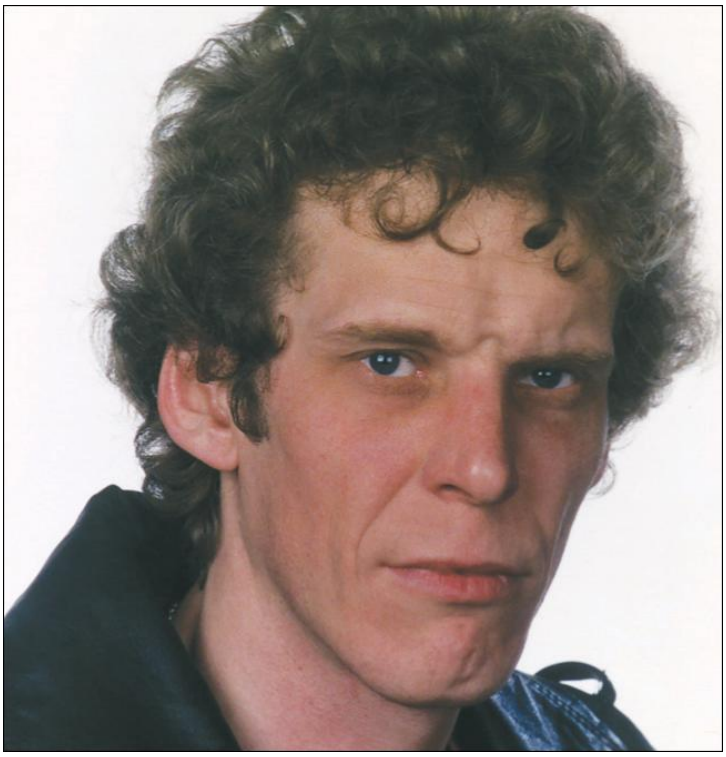
Dear Russ, Thank you for your letter of 3rd Aug. The Mary Bell controversy is generated by a fear, on foundations of hypocrisy, by Society ~~who~~ which becomes deeply agitated when the spotlight of close examination falls upon itself and its own hallowed myths. History had dismissed the traumas of Mary Bell from ~~to~~ consciousness merely by placing her, outside the realms of human experience, with the expedient use of the label 'MONSTER' and shelving/hiding her inside a penal institution. This method spared Society from having to acknowledge their association with her name for that dark memory existing in a version of her life cobbled together by others as "crime/non fiction". This neat ritual saved them the bother of having to think too much on her actions as a human in a community. Justice was done and she was gone - out of sight and completely out of mind. Her voice is always the voice of Others.

A letter in Nilsen's own handwriting to author Russ Coffey.
Photo ©Russ Coffey

Nilsen's pet dog, Bleep, pictured at Battersea Dogs Home where she passed away three weeks after the arrest of her master.
Photo ©Mirrorpix

Police plastic covers in the garden of 195 Melrose Avenue, Cricklewood, North London, where Nilsen started his killing spree, hiding the bodies under the floorboards of his flat.

Photo ©Mirrorpix



Jimmy Butler, with whom Nilsen had a ‘romance’ whilst in Wakefield Prison.

Photo ©Mirrorpix

A compilation tape which Nilsen made of his own music. He also designed the artwork.

Photo ©Russ Coffey

The house at 16 Baird Road, Strichen, near Fraserburgh, where Nilsen spent his most formative childhood years.

Photo ©Russ Coffey

The carving knife used by Nilsen to dismember the bodies of his victims.

Photo ©Mirrorpix

Carl Stottor, who survived an attack by Nilsen, pictured in August 2005.

Photo ©Mirrorpix

Survivor Martyn Hunter-Craig pictured outside 23 Cranley Gardens. He often stayed with Nilsen over a period of three years without realising that he was murdering people during that time.

Photo ©Mirrorpix

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